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# A Malazan Book of the Fallen

## Collection 4

Steven Erikson

Reaper's Gale
Toll the Hounds

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Archaeologist and anthropologist Steven Erikson is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His first fantasy novel, *Gardens of the Moon*, marked the opening chapter in his epic 'Malazan Book of the Fallen' sequence and was shortlisted for a World Fantasy Award. The equally acclaimed subsequent volumes are *Deadhouse Gates*, *Memories of Ice*, *House of Chains*, *Midnight Tides*, *The Bonehunters* and *Reaper's Gale*. The thrilling eighth instalment in this remarkable story, *Toll the Hounds*, is coming soon from Bantam Press. Steven Erikson lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

www.rbooks.co.uk

**Acclaim for Steven Erikson's**
***The Malazan Book of the Fallen:***

'Steven Erikson is an extraordinary writer . . . My advice to anyone who might listen to me is: treat yourself' Stephen R. Donaldson

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*By Steven Erikson*

GARDENS OF THE MOON
DEADHOUSE GATES
MEMORIES OF ICE
HOUSE OF CHAINS
MIDNIGHT TIDES
THE BONEHUNTERS
REAPER'S GALE

*published by Bantam Books*

TOLL THE HOUNDS

*Soon to be published by Bantam Press*

*Also by Steven Erikson*

BLOOD FOLLOWS
THE HEALTHY DEAD
THE DEVIL DELIVERED
FISHIN' WITH GRANDMA MATCHIE

# Reaper's Gale

A Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

**STEVEN ERIKSON**

**BANTAM BOOKS**

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

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To Glen Cook

# Acknowledgements

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# The EMPIRE of LETHER

*and its neighbours...*

N
BLUEROSE SEA
Outbound
Jasp
Bluerose
Pearls
Stall
Wend
Sealchest
Otived
Caester
Karasch
EXESTER
DRENE
AWLDAN
AKRYN
DRHASILHANI
Sophland Kingdom
Balkando Kingdom
Krass

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE LETHERII

**Tehol Beddict**, a destitute resident

**Bugg**, Tehol's manservant

**Shurq Elalle**, an itinerant pirate

**Skorgen Kaban**, Shurq's First Mate

**Ublala Pung**, an unemployed Tarthenal half-blood

**Ormly**, a member of the Rat Catchers' Guild

**Rucket**, Chief Investigator of the Rat Catchers' Guild

**Karos Invictad**, Invigilator of the Patriotists

**Tanal Yathvanar**, Karos's personal assistant

**Rautos Hivanar**, Master of the Liberty Consign of Merchants

**Venitt Sathad**, Rautos's principal field agent

**Triban Gnol**, Chancellor of the New Empire

**Nisall**, First Concubine of the old emperor

**Janall**, deposed empress

**Turudal Brizad**, ex-consort

**Janath Anar**, a political prisoner

**Sirryn Kanar**, a palace guard

**Brullyg (Shake)**, nominal Ruler of Second Maiden Fort

**Yedan Derryg (The Watch)**

**Orbyn 'Truthfinder'**, Section Commander of the Patriotists

**Letur Anict**, Factor in Drene

**Bivatt**, Atri-Preda of the Eastern Army

**Feather Witch**, Letherii slave to Uruth

THE TISTE EDUR

**Rhulad**, ruler of the New Empire

**Hannan Mosag**, Imperial Ceda

**Uruth**, Matriarch of the Emperor and wife to Tomad Sengar

**K'risnan**, warlocks of the Emperor

**Bruthen Trana**, Edur in palace

**Brohl Handar**, Overseer of the East in Drene

ARRIVING WITH THE EDUR FLEET

**Yan Tovis (Twilight)**, Atri-Preda of the Letherii Army

**Varat Taun**, her lieutenant

**Taralack Veed**, a Gral agent of the Nameless Ones

**Icarium**, Taralack's weapon

**Hanradi Khalag**, a warlock of the Tiste Edur

**Tomad Sengar**, Patriarch of the Emperor

**Samar Dev**, a scholar and witch from Seven Cities

**Karsa Orlong**, a Toblakai warrior

**Taxilian**, an interpreter

THE AWL'DAN

**Redmask**, an exile who returned

**Masarch**, a warrior of the Renfayar Clan

**Hadralt**, War Leader of Ganetok Clan

**Sag'Churok**, a bodyguard to Redmask

**Gunth Mach**, a bodyguard to Redmask

**Torrent**, a Copperface

**Natarkas**, a Copperface

THE HUNTED

**Seren Pedac**, a Letherii Acquitor

**Fear Sengar**, a Tiste Edur

**Kettle**, a Letherii orphan

**Udinaas**, a Letherii runaway slave

**Wither**, a shadow wraith

**Silchas Ruin**, a Tiste Andii Ascendant

THE REFUGIUM

**Ulshun Pral**, an Imass

**Rud Elalle**, an adopted foundling

**Hostille Rator**, a T'lan Imass

**Til'aras Benok**, a T'lan Imass

**Gr'istanas Ish'ilm**, a T'lan Imass

THE MALAZANS

**Bonehunters**

**Tavore Paran**, Commander of the Bonehunters

**Lostara Yil**, Second to Tavore

**Keneb**, Fist in the Bonehunters

**Blistig**, Fist in the Bonehunters

**Faradan Sort**, Captain

**Madan'tul Rada**, Faradan Sort's lieutenant

**Grub**, adopted son of Keneb

**Beak**, mage seconded to Captain Faradan Sort

**8th Legion, 9th Company**

*4th Squad*

**Fiddler**, sergeant

**Tarr**, corporal

**Koryk**, half-blood Seti, marine

**Smiles**, Kanese, marine

**Cuttle**, sapper

**Bottle**, squad mage

**Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas,** soldier

*5th Squad*

**Gesler**, sergeant

**Stormy**, corporal

**Sands**, marine

**Shortnose**, heavy infantry

**Flashwit**, heavy infantry

**Uru Hela**, heavy infantry

**Mayfly**, heavy infantry

*7th Squad*

**Cord**, sergeant

**Shard**, corporal

**Limp**, marine

**Ebron**, squad mage

**Crump (Jamber Bole)**, sapper

**Sinn**, mage

*8th Squad*

**Hellian**, sergeant

**Touchy**, corporal #1

**Brethless**, corporal #2

**Balgrid**, squad mage

**Tavos Pond**, marine

**Maybe**, sapper

**Lutes**, squad healer

*9th Squad*

**Balm**, sergeant

**Deadsmell**, corporal

**Throatslitter**, marine

**Galt**, marine

**Lobe**, marine

**Widdershins**, squad mage

*12th Squad*

**Thom Tissy**, sergeant

**Tulip**, corporal

**Ramp**, heavy infantry

**Jibb**, medium infantry

**Gullstream**, medium infantry

**Mudslinger**, medium infantry

**Bellig Harn**, heavy infantry

*13th Squad*

**Urb**, sergeant

**Reem**, corporal

**Masan Gilani**, marine

**Bowl**, heavy infantry

**Hanno**, heavy infantry

**Saltlick**, heavy infantry

**Scant**, heavy infantry

**8th Legion, 3rd Company**

*4th Squad*

**Pravalak Rim**, corporal

**Honey**, sapper

**Strap Mull**, sapper

**Shoaly**, heavy infantry

**Lookback**, heavy infantry

*5th Squad*

**Badan Gruk**, sergeant

**Ruffle**, marine

**Skim**, marine

**Nep Furrow**, mage

**Reliko**, heavy infantry

**Vastly Blank**, heavy infantry

*10th Squad*

**Primly**, sergeant

**Hunt**, corporal

**Mulvan Dreader**, mage

**Neller**, sapper

**Skulldeath**, marine

**Drawfirst**, heavy infantry

OTHERS

**Banaschar**, the Last Priest of D'rek

**Withal**, a Meckros Swordsmith

**Sandalath Drukorlat**, a Tiste Andii, Withal's wife

**Nimander Golit**, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake

**Phaed**, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake

**Curdle**, a possessed skeletal reptile

**Telorast**, a possessed skeletal reptile

**Onrack**, a T'lan Imass, unbound

**Trull Sengar**, a Tiste Edur renegade

**Ben Adaephon Delat**, a wizard

**Menandore**, a Soletaken (Sister of Dawn)

**Sheltatha Lore**, a Soletaken (Sister of Dusk)

**Sukul Ankhadu**, a Soletaken (Sister Dapple)

**Kilmandaros**, an Elder Goddess

**Clip**, a Tiste Andii

**Cotillion**, The Rope, Patron God of Assassins

**Emroth**, a broken T'lan Imass

**Hedge**, a ghost

**Old Hunch Arbat**, Tarthenal

**Pithy**, an ex-con

**Brevity**, an ex-con

**Pully**, a Shake witch

**Skwish**, a Shake witch

# PROLOGUE

*The Elder Warren of Kurald Emurlahn*
*The Age of Sundering*

In a landscape torn with grief, the carcasses of six dragons lay strewn in a ragged row reaching a thousand or more paces across the plain, flesh split apart, broken bones jutting, jaws gaping and eyes brittle-dry. Where their blood had spilled out onto the ground wraiths had gathered like flies to sap and were now ensnared, the ghosts writhing and voicing hollow cries of despair, as the blood darkened, fusing with the lifeless soil; and, when at last the substance grew indurate, hardening into glassy stone, those ghosts were doomed to an eternity trapped within that murky prison.

The naked creature that traversed the rough path formed by the fallen dragons was a match to their mass, yet bound to the earth, and it walked on two bowed legs, the thighs thick as thousand-year-old trees. The width of its shoulders was equal to the length of a Tartheno Toblakai's height; from a thick neck hidden beneath a mane of glossy black hair, the frontal portion of the head was thrust forward – brow, cheekbones and jaw, and its deep-set eyes revealing black pupils surrounded in opalescent white. The huge arms were disproportionately long, the enormous hands almost scraping the ground. Its breasts were large, pendulous and pale. As it strode past the battered, rotting carcasses, the motion of its gait was strangely fluid, not at all lumbering, and each limb was revealed to possess extra joints.

Skin the hue of sun-bleached bone, darkening to veined red at the ends of the creature's arms, bruises surrounding the knuckles, a latticework of cracked flesh exposing the bone here and there. The hands had seen damage, the result of delivering devastating blows.

It paused to tilt its head, upward, and watched as three dragons sailed the air high amidst the roiling clouds, appearing then disappearing in the smoke of the dying realm.

The earthbound creature's hands twitched, and a low growl emerged from deep in its throat.

After a long moment, it resumed its journey.

Beyond the last of the dead dragons, to a place where rose a ridge of hills, the largest of these cleft through as if a giant claw had gouged out the heart of the rise, and in that crevasse raged a rent, a tear in space that bled power in nacreous streams. The malice of that energy was evident in the manner in which it devoured the sides of the fissure, eating like acid into the rocks and boulders of the ancient berm.

The rent would soon close, and the one who had last passed through had sought to seal the gate behind him. But such healing could never be done in haste, and this wound bled anew.

Ignoring the virulence pouring from the rent, the creature strode closer. At the threshold it paused again and turned to look back the way it had come.

Draconean blood hardening into stone, horizontal sheets of the substance, already beginning to separate from the surrounding earth, to lift up on edge, forming strange, disarticulated walls. Some then began sinking, vanishing from this realm. Falling through world after world. To reappear, finally, solid and impermeable, in other realms, depending on the blood's aspect, and these were laws that could not be challenged. Starvald Demelain, the blood of dragons and the death of blood.

In the distance behind the creature, Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadows, the first realm born of the conjoining of Dark and Light, convulsed in its death-throes. Far away, the civil wars still raged on, whilst in other areas the fragmenting had already begun, vast sections of this world's fabric torn away, disconnected and lost and abandoned – to either heal round themselves, or die. Yet interlopers still arrived here, like scavengers gathered round a fallen leviathan, eagerly tearing free their own

private pieces of the realm. Destroying each other in fierce battles over the scraps.

It had not been imagined – by anyone – that an entire realm could die in such a manner. That the vicious acts of its inhabitants could destroy . . . everything. Worlds live on, had been the belief – the assumption – regardless of the activities of those who dwelt upon them. Torn flesh heals, the sky clears, and something new crawls from the briny muck.

But not this time.

Too many powers, too many betrayals, too vast and all-consuming the crimes.

The creature faced the gate once more.

Then Kilmandaros, the Elder Goddess, strode through.

*The ruined K'Chain Che'Malle demesne*
*after the fall of Silchas Ruin*

Trees were exploding in the bitter cold that descended like a shroud, invisible yet palpable, upon this racked, devastated forest.

Gothos had no difficulty following the path of the battle, the successive clashes of two Elder Gods warring with the Soletaken dragon, and as the Jaghut traversed its mangled length he brought with him the brutal chill of Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice. *Sealing the deal, as you asked of me, Mael. Locking the truth in place, to make it more than memory. Until the day that witnesses the shattering of Omtose Phellack itself.* Gothos wondered, idly, if there had ever been a time when he believed that such a shattering would *not* come to pass. That the Jaghut, in all their perfected brilliance, were unique, triumphant in eternal domination. A civilization immortal, when all others were doomed.

Well, it was possible. He had once believed that all of existence was under the benign control of a caring omnipotence, after all. *And crickets exist to sing us to sleep, too*. There was no telling what other foolishness might have crept into his young, naive brain all those millennia ago.

No longer, of course. Things end. Species die out. Faith in anything else was a conceit, the product of unchained ego, the curse of supreme self-importance.

*So what do I now believe?*

He would not permit himself a melodramatic laugh in answer to that question. What was the point? There was no-one nearby who might appreciate it. Including himself. *Yes, I am cursed to live with my own company.*

*It's a private curse.*

*The best kind.*

He ascended a broken, fractured rise, some violent uplift of bedrock, where a vast fissure had opened, its vertical sides already glistening with frost when Gothos came to the edge and looked down. Somewhere in the darkness below, two voices were raised in argument.

Gothos smiled.

He opened his warren, made use of a sliver of power to fashion a slow, controlled descent towards the gloomy base of the crevasse.

As Gothos neared, the two voices ceased, leaving only a rasping, hissing sound, pulsating – the drawing of breath on waves of pain – and the Jaghut heard the slithering of scales on stone, slightly off to one side.

He alighted atop broken shards of rock, a few paces from where stood Mael, and, ten paces beyond him, the huge form of Kilmandaros, her skin vaguely luminescent – in a sickly sort of way – standing with hands closed into fists, a belligerent cast to her brutal mien.

Scabandari, the Soletaken dragon, had been driven into a hollow in the cliff-side and now crouched, splintered ribs no doubt making every breath an ordeal of agony. One wing was shattered, half torn away. A hind limb was clearly broken, bones punched through flesh. Its flight was at an end.

The two Elders were now eyeing Gothos, who strode forward, then spoke. 'I am always delighted,' he said, 'when a betrayer is in turn betrayed. In this

instance, betrayed by his own stupidity. Which is even more delightful.'

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, asked, 'The Ritual . . . are you done, Gothos?'

'More or less.' The Jaghut fixed his gaze on Kilmandaros. 'Elder Goddess. Your children in this realm have lost their way.'

The huge bestial woman shrugged, and said in a faint, melodic voice, 'They're always losing their way, Jaghut.'

'Well, why don't you do something about it?'

'Why don't you?'

One thin brow lifted, then Gothos bared his tusks in a smile. 'Is that an invitation, Kilmandaros?'

She looked over at the dragon. 'I have no time for this. I need to return to Kurald Emurlahn. I will kill him now—' and she stepped closer.

'You must not,' Mael said.

Kilmandaros faced him, huge hands opening then closing again into fists. 'So you keep saying, you boiled crab.'

Shrugging, Mael turned to Gothos. 'Explain it to her, please.'

'How many debts do you wish to owe me?' the Jaghut asked him.

'Oh now really, Gothos!'

'Very well. Kilmandaros. Within the Ritual that now descends upon this land, upon the battlefields and these ugly forests, death itself is denied. Should you kill the Tiste Edur here, his soul will be unleashed from his flesh, but it will remain, only marginally reduced in power.'

'I mean to kill him,' Kilmandaros said in her soft voice.

'Then,' Gothos's smile broadened, 'you will need me.'

Mael snorted.

'Why do I need you?' Kilmandaros asked the Jaghut.

He shrugged. 'A Finnest must be prepared. To house, to imprison, this Soletaken's soul.'

'Very well, then make one.'

'As a favour to you both? I think not, Elder Goddess. No, alas, as with Mael here, you must acknowledge a debt. To me.'

'I have a better idea,' Kilmandaros said. 'I crush your skull between a finger and thumb, then I push your carcass down Scabandari's throat, so that he suffocates on your pompous self. This seems a fitting demise for the both of you.'

'Goddess, you have grown bitter and crabby in your old age,' Gothos said.

'It is no surprise,' she replied. 'I made the mistake of trying to save Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Why bother?' Mael asked her.

Kilmandaros bared jagged teeth. 'The precedent is . . . unwelcome. You go bury your head in the sands again, Mael, but I warn you, the death of one realm is a promise to every other realm.'

'As you say,' the Elder God said after a moment. 'And I do concede that possibility. In any case, Gothos demands recompense.'

The fists unclenched, then clenched again. 'Very well. Now, Jaghut, fashion a Finnest.'

'This will do,' Gothos said, drawing an object into view from a tear in his ragged shirt.

The two Elders stared at it for a time, then Mael grunted. 'Yes, I see, now. Rather curious choice, Gothos.'

'The only kind I make,' the Jaghut replied. 'Go on, then, Kilmandaros, proceed with your subtle conclusion to the Soletaken's pathetic existence.'

The dragon hissed, screamed in rage and fear as the Elder Goddess advanced.

When she drove a fist into Scabandari's skull, centred on the ridge between and above the draconic eyes, the crack of the thick bone rang like a dirge down the length of the crevasse, and with the impact blood spurted from the Goddess's knuckles.

The dragon's broken head thumped heavily onto the broken bedrock, fluids spilling out from beneath the sagging body.

Kilmandaros wheeled to face Gothos.

He nodded. 'I have the poor bastard.'

Mael stepped towards the Jaghut, holding out a hand. 'I will take the Finnest then—'

'No.'

Both Elders now faced Gothos, who smiled once more.

'Repayment of the debt. For each of you. I claim the Finnest, the soul of Scabandari, for myself. Nothing remains between us, now. Are you not pleased?'

'What do you intend to do with it?' Mael demanded.

'I have not yet decided, but I assure you, it will be most curiously unpleasant.'

Kilmandaros made fists again with her hands and half raised them. 'I am tempted, Jaghut, to send my children after you.'

'Too bad they've lost their way, then.'

Neither Elder said another word as Gothos departed from the fissure. It always pleased him, outwitting doddering old wrecks and all their hoary, brutal power. Well, a momentary pleasure, in any case.

*The best kind.*

* * *

Upon her return to the rent, Kilmandaros found another figure standing before it. Black-cloaked, white-haired. An expression of arched

contemplation, fixed upon the torn fissure.

About to enter the gate, or waiting for her? The Elder Goddess scowled. 'You are not welcome in Kurald Emurlahn,' she said.

Anomandaris Purake settled cool eyes upon the monstrous creature. 'Do you imagine I contemplate claiming the throne for myself?'

'You would not be the first.'

He faced the rent again. 'You are besieged, Kilmandaros, and Edgewalker is committed elsewhere. I offer you my help.'

'With you, Tiste Andii, my trust is not easily earned.'

'Unjustified,' he replied. 'Unlike many others of my kind, I accept that the rewards of betrayal are never sufficient to overwhelm the cost. There are Soletaken now, in addition to feral dragons, warring in Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Where is Osserc?' the Elder Goddess asked. 'Mael informed me that he—'

'Was planning to get in my way again? Osserc imagined I would take part in slaying Scabandari. Why should I? You and Mael were more than enough.' He grunted then. 'I can picture Osserc, circling round and round. Looking for me. Idiot.'

'And Scabandari's betrayal of your brother? You have no desire to avenge that?'

Anomandaris glanced at her, then gave her a faint smile. 'The rewards of betrayal. The cost to Scabandari proved high, didn't it? As for Silchas, well, even the Azath do not last for ever. I almost envy him his new-found isolation from all that will afflict us in the millennia to come.'

'Indeed. Do you wish to join him in a similar barrow?'

'I think not.'

'Then I imagine that Silchas Ruin will not be inclined to forgive you your indifference, the day he is freed.'

'You might be surprised, Kilmandaros.'

'You and your kind are mysteries to me, Anomandaris Purake.'

'I know. So, Goddess, have we a pact?'

She cocked her head. 'I mean to drive the pretenders from the realm – if Kurald Emurlahn must die, then let it do so on its own.'

'In other words, you want to leave the Throne of Shadow unoccupied.'

'Yes.'

He thought for a time, then he nodded. 'Agreed.'

'Do not wrong me, Soletaken.'

'I shall not. Are you ready, Kilmandaros?'

'They will forge alliances,' she said. 'They will all war against us.'

Anomandaris shrugged. 'I have nothing better to do today.'

The two Ascendants then walked through the gate, and, together, they closed the rent behind them. There were other paths, after all, to this realm. Paths that were not wounds.

Arriving within Kurald Emurlahn, they looked upon a ravaged world.

Then set about cleansing what was left of it.

*The Awl'dan, in the last days of King Diskanar*

Preda Bivatt, a captain in the Drene Garrison, was far from home. Twenty-one days by wagon, commanding an expedition of two hundred soldiers of the Tattered Banner Army, a troop of thirty Bluerose light cavalry, and four hundred support staff, including civilians, she had, after delivering orders for the setting of camp, slid down from the back of her horse to walk the fifty-odd paces to the edge of the bluff.

When she reached the rise the wind struck her a hammer blow to her chest, as if eager to fling her back, to scrape her from this battered lip of land. The ocean beyond the ridge was a vision from an artist's nightmare, a seascape torn, churning, with heavy twisting clouds shredding apart

overhead. The water was more white than blue-green, foam boiling, spume flying out from between rocks as the waves pounded the shore.

Yet, she saw with a chill rushing in to bludgeon her bones, this was the place.

A fisher boat, blown well off course, into the deadly maelstrom that was this stretch of ocean, a stretch that no trader ship, no matter how large, would willingly venture into. A stretch that had, eighty years ago, caught a Meckros City and had torn it to pieces, pulling into the depths twenty thousand or more dwellers of that floating settlement.

The fisher crew had survived, long enough to draw their beleaguered craft safely aground in hip-deep water thirty or so paces from the bedrock strand. Catch lost, their boat punched into kindling by relentless waves, the four Letherii managed to reach dry land.

To find . . . this.

Tightening the strap of her helm, lest the wind tear it and her head from her shoulders, Preda Bivatt continued scanning the wreckage lining this shoreline. The promontory she stood on was undercut, dropping away three man-heights to a bank of white sand heaped with elongated rows of dead kelp, uprooted trees, and remnants of eighty-year-old Meckros City. And something else. Something more unexpected.

War canoes. The seagoing kind, each as long as a coralface whale, high-prowed, longer and broader of beam than Tiste Edur craft. Not flung ashore as wreckage – no, not one she could see displayed anything like damage. They were drawn up in rows high along the beach, although it was clear that that had happened some time past – months at least, perhaps years.

A presence at her side. The merchant from Drene who had been contracted to supply this expedition. Pale-skinned, his hair pallid blond, so fair as to be nearly white. The wind was blasting red the man's round face, but she could see his light blue eyes fixed on the array of war canoes, tracking, first westward along the beach, then eastward. 'I have some talent,' he said to her, loudly so as to be heard over the gale.

Bivatt said nothing. The merchant no doubt had skill with numbers – his claim to talent. And she was an officer in the Letherii Army, and could well gauge the likely complement of each enormous craft without his help. A hundred, give or take twenty.

'Preda?'

'What?'

The merchant gestured helplessly. 'These canoes.' He waved up the beach, then down. 'There must be . . .' And then he was at a loss for words.

She well understood him.

*Yes*. Rows upon rows, all drawn up to this forbidding shore. Drene, the nearest city of the kingdom, was three weeks away, to the southwest. Directly south of here was the land of the Awl'dan, and of the tribes' seasonal rounds with their huge herds virtually all was known. The Letherii were in the process of conquering them, after all. There had been no report of anything like this.

Thus. Not long ago, a fleet arrived upon this shore. Whereupon everyone had disembarked, taking all they had with them, and then, presumably, set off inland.

There should have been signs, rumours, a reverberation among the Awl at the very least. *We should have heard about it.*

But they hadn't. The foreign invaders had simply . . . disappeared.

*Not possible. How can it be?* She scanned the rows once again, as if hoping that some fundamental detail would reveal itself, would ease the hammering of her heart and the leaden chill of her limbs.

'Preda . . .'

*Yes. One hundred per craft. And here before us . . . stacked four, five deep – what? Four, maybe five thousand?* The north shoreline was a mass of grey-wooded war canoes, for almost as far as she could see to the west and to the east. Drawn up. Abandoned. Filling the shore like a toppled forest.

'Upwards of a half-million,' the merchant said. 'That is my estimate. Preda, where in the Errant's name did they all go?'

She scowled. 'Kick that mage nest of yours, Letur Anict. Make them earn their exorbitant fees. The king needs to know. Every detail. *Everything*.'

'At once,' the man said.

While she would do the same with the Ceda's squad of acolytes. The redundancy was necessary. Without the presence of Kuru Qan's chosen students, she would never learn all that Letur Anict held back on his final report, would never be able to distil the truths from the half-truths, the outright lies. A perennial problem with hiring private contractors – they had their own interests, after all, and loyalty to the crown was, for creatures like Letur Anict, the new Factor of Drene, always secondary.

She began looking for a way down onto the beach. Bivatt wanted a closer look at these canoes, especially since it seemed that sections of their prows had been dismantled. *Which is an odd thing to do. Yet, a manageable mystery, one I can deal with and so not think about all the rest.*

'*Upwards of a half-million*.'

*Errant's blessing, who is now among us?*

*The Awl'dan, following the Edur conquest*

The wolves had come, then gone, and where corpses had been dragged out from the solid press atop the hilltop – where the unknown soldiers had made their last stand – the signs of their feeding were evident, and this detail remained with the lone rider as he walked his horse amidst the motionless, sprawled bodies. Such pillaging of the dead was . . . unusual. The dun-furred wolves of this plain were as opportunistic as any other predator on the Awl'dan, of course. Even so, long experience with humans should have sent the beasts fleeing at the first sour scent, even if it was commingled with that of spilled blood. What, then, had drawn them to this silent battlefield?

The lone rider, face hidden behind a crimson scaled mask, drew rein near the base of the low hill. His horse was dying, racked with shivers; before

the day's end the man would be walking. As he was breaking camp this dawn, a horn-nosed snake had nipped the horse as it fed on a tuft of sliver-stem grasses at the edge of a gully. The poison was slow but inevitable, and could not be neutralized by any of the herbs and medicines the man carried. The loss was regrettable but not disastrous, since he had not been travelling in haste.

Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended – nor had his arrival stirred them from this feast; indeed, it had been the sight of them, wheeling above this hill, that had guided him to this place. Their cries were infrequent, strangely muted, almost plaintive.

The Drene legions had taken away their dead, leaving naught but their victims to feed the grasses of the plain. The morning's frost still mapped glistening patterns on death-dark skin, but the melt had already begun, and it seemed to him that these dead soldiers now wept, from stilled faces, from open eyes, from mortal wounds.

Rising on his stirrups, he scanned the horizon – as much of it as he could see – seeking sight of his two companions, but the dread creatures had yet to return from their hunt, and he wondered if they had found a new, more inviting trail somewhere to the west – the Letherii soldiers of Drene, marching triumphant and glutted back to their city. If so, then there would be slaughter on this day. The notion of vengeance, however, was incidental. His companions were indifferent to such sentiments. They killed for pleasure, as far as he could tell. Thus, the annihilation of the Drene, and any vengeance that could be ascribed to the deed existed only in his own mind. The distinction was important.

Even so, a satisfying conceit.

Yet, these victims here were strangers, these soldiers in their grey and black uniforms. Stripped now of weapons and armour, standards taken as trophies, their presence here in the Awl'dan – in the heart of the rider's homeland – was perturbing.

He knew the invading Letherii, after all. The numerous legions with their peculiar names and fierce rivalries; he knew as well the fearless cavalry of

the Bluerose. And the still-free kingdoms and territories bordering the Awl'dan, the rival D'rhasilhani, the Keryn, the Bolkando Kingdom and the Saphinand State – he had treated with or crossed blades with them all, years ago, and none were as these soldiers here.

Pale-skinned, hair the colour of straw or red as rust. Eyes of blue or grey. And . . . *so many women.*

His gaze settled upon one such soldier, a woman near the hill's summit. Mangled by sorcery, her armour melded with the twisted flesh – there were sigils visible on that armour . . .

Dismounting, he ascended the slope, picking his way round bodies, moccasins skidding on blood-soaked mud, until he crouched down at her side.

Paint on the blackened bronze hauberk. Wolf heads, a pair. One was white-furred and one-eyed, the other furred silver and black. A sigil he had not seen before.

Strangers indeed.

Foreigners. Here, in the land of his heart.

Behind the mask, he scowled. *Gone. Too long. Am I now the stranger?*

Heavy drumbeats reverberated through the ground beneath his feet. He straightened. His companions were returning.

So, no vengeance after all.

Well, there was time yet.

The mournful howl of wolves had awakened him this morning, their calls the first to draw him here, to this place, as if they sought a witness, as if indeed they had summoned him. While their cries had urged him on, he had not caught sight of the beasts, not once.

The wolves had fed, however, some time this morning. Dragging bodies from the press.

His steps slowed as he made his way down the slope, slowed until he stood, his breath drawn in and held as he looked more closely at the dead soldiers on all sides.

*The wolves have fed. But not as wolves do . . . not like . . . like this.*

Chests torn open, ribs jutting . . . they had devoured hearts. Nothing else. Just the hearts.

The drumbeats were louder now, closer, the rake of talons hissing through grass. Overhead, the ravens, screaming, fled in all directions.

# BOOK ONE

# THE EMPEROR IN GOLD

The lie stands alone, the solitary deceit with its back turned no matter the direction of your reluctant approach, and with each step your goal is driven on, your stride carried astray, the path enfolding upon itself, round and round you walk and what stood alone before you, errant as mischance, an accidental utterance, now reveals its legion of children, this mass seething in threads and knots and surrounded, you cannot draw breath, cannot move.

The world is of your making and one day, my friend, you will stand alone amidst a sea of dead, the purchasing of your words all about you and the wind will laugh you a new path into unending torment – the solitary deceit is its solitude, the lie is the lie standing alone, the threads and knots of the multitude tighten in righteous judgement with which you once so freely strangled every truthsayer, every voice of dissent.

So now ease your thirst on my sympathy and die parched in the wasteland.

Fragment found on the day
the poetess Tesora Veddict
was arrested by the Patriotists
(six days before her Drowning)

# CHAPTER ONE

> Two forces, once in vicious opposition, now found themselves virtual bedmates, although neither could decide which of them had their legs pried open first. The simple facts are these: the original hierarchical structure of the Tiste Edur tribes proved well-suited to the Letherii system of power through wealth. The Edur became the crown, settling easy upon the bloated gluttony of Lether, but does a crown possess will? Does the wearer buckle beneath its burden? Another truth is now, in hindsight, self-evident. As seamless as this merging seemed to be, a more subtle, far deadlier conjoining occurred below the surface: that of the specific flaws within each system, and this blending was to prove a most volatile brew.
>
> *The Hiroth Dynasty (Volume XVII)*
> *The Colony, a History of Lether*
> Dinith Arnara

'Where is this one from?'

Tanal Yathvanar watched the Invigilator slowly rotating the strange object in his pudgy hands, the onyx stones in the many rings on the short fingers glimmering in the shafts of sunlight that reached in through the opened window. The object Karos Invictad manipulated was a misshapen collection of bronze pins, the ends bent into loops that were twisted about one another to form a stiff cage. 'Bluerose, I believe, sir,' Tanal replied. 'One of Senorbo's. The average duration for solving it is three days, although the record is just under two—'

'Who?' Karos demanded, glancing up from where he sat behind his desk.

'A Tarthenal half-blood, if you can believe that, sir. Here in Letheras. The man is reputedly a simpleton, yet possesses a natural talent for solving puzzles.'

'And the challenge is to slide the pins into a configuration to create a sudden collapse.'

'Yes sir. It flattens out. From what I have heard the precise number of manipulations is—'

'No, Tanal, do not tell me. You should know better.' The Invigilator, commander of the Patriotists, set the object down. 'Thank you for the gift. Now,' a brief smile, 'have we inconvenienced Bruthen Trana long enough, do you think?' Karos rose, paused to adjust his crimson silks – the only colour and the only material he ever wore – then collected the short sceptre he had made his official symbol of office, black bloodwood from the Edur homeland with silver caps studded in polished onyx stones, and gestured with it in the direction of the door.

Tanal bowed then led the way out into the corridor, to the broad stairs where they descended to the main floor, then strode through the double doors and out into the compound.

The row of prisoners had been positioned in full sunlight, near the west wall of the enclosure. They had been taken from their cells a bell before dawn and it was now shortly past midday. Lack of water and food, and this morning's searing heat, combined with brutal sessions of questioning over the past week, had resulted in more than half of the eighteen detainees losing consciousness.

Tanal saw the Invigilator's frown upon seeing the motionless bodies collapsed in their chains.

The Tiste Edur liaison, Bruthen Trana of the Den-Ratha tribe, was standing in the shade, more or less across from the prisoners, and the tall, silent figure slowly turned as Tanal and Karos approached.

'Bruthen Trana, most welcome,' said Karos Invictad. 'You are well?'

'Let us proceed, Invigilator,' the grey-skinned warrior said.

'At once. If you will accompany me, we can survey each prisoner assembled here. The specific cases—'

'I have no interest in approaching them any closer than I am now,' Bruthen said. 'They are fouled in their own wastes and there is scant breeze in this enclosure.'

Karos smiled. 'I understand, Bruthen.' He leaned his sceptre against a shoulder then faced the row of detainees. 'We need not approach, as you say. I will begin with the one to the far left, then—'

'Unconscious or dead?'

'Well, at this distance, who can say?'

Noting the Edur's scowl, Tanal bowed to Bruthen and Karos and walked the fifteen paces to the line. He crouched to examine the prone figure, then straightened. 'He lives.'

'Then awaken him!' Karos commanded. His voice, when raised, became shrill, enough to make a foolish listener wince – foolish, that is, if the Invigilator was witness to that instinctive reaction. Such careless errors happened but once.

Tanal kicked at the prisoner until the man managed a dry, rasping sob. 'On your feet, traitor,' Tanal said in a quiet tone. 'The Invigilator demands it. Stand, or I will begin breaking bones in that pathetic sack you call a body.'

He watched as the prisoner struggled upright.

'Water, please—'

'Not another word from you. Straighten up, face your crimes. You are Letherii, aren't you? Show our Edur guest the meaning of that.'

Tanal then made his way back to Karos and Bruthen. The Invigilator had begun speaking. '. . . known associations with dissenting elements in the Physicians' College – he has admitted as much. Although no specific crimes can be laid at this man's feet, it is clear that—'

'The next one,' Bruthen Trana cut in.

Karos closed his mouth, then smiled without showing his teeth. 'Of course. The next is a poet, who wrote and distributed a call for revolution.

He denies nothing and indeed, you can see his stoic defiance even from here.'

'And the one beside him?'

'The proprietor of an inn, the tavern of which was frequented by undesirable elements – disenchanted soldiers, in fact – and two of them are among these detainees. We were informed of the sedition by an honourable whore—'

'Honourable whore, Invigilator?' The Edur half smiled.

Karos blinked. 'Why, yes, Bruthen Trana.'

'Because she informed on an innkeeper.'

'An innkeeper engaged in treason—'

'Demanding too high a cut of her earnings, more likely. Go on, and please, keep your descriptions of the crimes brief.'

'Of course,' Karos Invictad said, the sceptre gently tapping on his soft shoulder, like a baton measuring a slow march.

Tanal, standing at his commander's side, remained at attention whilst the Invigilator resumed his report of the specific transgressions of these Letherii. The eighteen prisoners were fair representations of the more than three hundred chained in cells below ground. A decent number of arrests for this week, Tanal reflected. And for the most egregious traitors among them waited the Drownings. Of the three hundred and twenty or so, a third were destined to walk the canal bottom, burdened beneath crushing weights. Bookmakers were complaining these days, since no-one ever survived the ordeal any more. Of course, they did not complain too loudly, since the true agitators among them risked their own Drowning – it had taken but a few of those early on to mute the protestations among the rest.

This was a detail Tanal had come to appreciate, one of Karos Invictad's perfect laws of compulsion and control, emphasized again and again in the vast treatise the Invigilator was penning on the subject most dear to his heart. *Take any segment of population, impose strict yet clear definitions on*

*their particular characteristics, then target them for compliance. Bribe the weak to expose the strong. Kill the strong, and the rest are yours. Move on to the next segment.*

Bookmakers had been easy targets, since few people liked them – especially inveterate gamblers, and of those there were more and more with every day that passed.

Karos Invictad concluded his litany. Bruthen Trana nodded, then turned and left the compound.

As soon as he was gone from sight, the Invigilator faced Tanal. 'An embarrassment,' he said. 'Those unconscious ones.'

'Yes sir.'

'A change of heads on the outer wall.'

'At once, sir.'

'Now, Tanal Yathvanar, before anything else, you must come with me. It will take but a moment, then you can return to the tasks at hand.'

They walked back into the building, the Invigilator's short steps forcing Tanal to slow up again and again as they made their way to Karos's office.

The most powerful man next to the Emperor himself took his place once more behind the desk. He picked up the cage of bronze pins, shifted a dozen or so in a flurry of precise moves, and the puzzle collapsed flat. Karos Invictad smiled across at Tanal, then flung the object onto the desk. 'Despatch a missive to Senorbo in Bluerose. Inform him of the time required for me to find a solution, then add, from me to him, that I fear he is losing his touch.'

'Yes, sir.'

Karos Invictad reached out for a scroll. 'Now, what was our agreed percentage on my interest in the Inn of the Belly-up Snake?'

'I believe Rautos indicated forty-five, sir.'

'Good. Even so, I believe a meeting is in order with the Master of the Liberty Consign. Later this week will do. For all our takings of late, we still possess a strange paucity in actual coin, and I want to know why.'

'Sir, you know Rautos Hivanar's suspicions on that matter.'

'Vaguely. He will be pleased to learn I am now prepared to listen more closely to said suspicions. Thus, two issues on the agenda. Schedule the meeting for a bell's duration. Oh, and one last thing, Tanal.'

'Sir?'

'Bruthen Trana. These weekly visits. I want to know, is he compelled? Is this some Edur form of royal disaffection or punishment? Or are the bastards truly interested in what we're up to? Bruthen makes no comment, ever. He does not even ask what punishments follow our judgements. Furthermore, his rude impatience tires me. It may be worth our while to investigate him.'

Tanal's brows rose. 'Investigate a Tiste Edur?'

'Quietly, of course. Granted, they ever give us the appearance of unquestioning loyalty, but I cannot help but wonder if they truly are immune to sedition among their own kind.'

'Even if they aren't, sir, respectfully, are the Patriotists the right organization—'

'The Patriotists, Tanal Yathvanar,' said Karos sharply, 'possess the imperial charter to police the empire. In that charter no distinction is made between Edur and Letherii, only between the loyal and the disloyal.'

'Yes sir.'

'Now, I believe you have tasks awaiting you.'

Tanal Yathvanar bowed, then strode from the office.

* * *

The estate dominated a shelf of land on the north bank of Lether River, four streets west of Quillas Canal. Stepped walls marking its boundaries made

their way down the bank, extending out into the water – on posts to ease the current's tug – more than two boat-lengths. Just beyond rose two mooring poles. There had been flooding this season. An infrequent occurrence in the past century, Rautos Hivanar noted as he leafed through the Estate Compendium – a family tome of notes and maps recording the full eight hundred years of Hivanar blood on this land. He settled back in the plush chair and, with contemplative languor, finished his balat tea.

The house steward and principal agent, Venitt Sathad, quietly stepped forward to return the Compendium to the wood and iron chest sunk in the floor beneath the map table, then replaced the floorboards and unfurled the rug over the spot. His tasks completed, he stepped back to resume his position beside the door.

Rautos Hivanar was a large man, his complexion florid, his features robust. His presence tended to dominate a room, no matter how spacious. He sat in the estate's library now, the walls shelved to the ceiling. Scrolls, clay tablets and bound books filled every available space, the gathered learning of a thousand scholars, many of whom bore the Hivanar name.

As head of the family and overseer of its vast financial holdings, Rautos Hivanar was a busy man, and such demands on his intellect had redoubled since the Tiste Edur conquest – which had triggered the official formation and recognition of the Liberty Consign, an association of the wealthiest families in the Lether Empire – in ways he could never have imagined before. He would be hard-pressed to explain how he found all such activities tedious or enervating. Yet that was what they had become, even as his suspicions slowly, incrementally, resolved into certainties; even as he began to perceive that, somewhere out there, there was an enemy – or enemies – bent on the singular task of economic sabotage. Not mere embezzlement, an activity with which he was personally very familiar, but something more profound, all-encompassing. *An enemy*. To all that sustained Rautos Hivanar, and the Liberty Consign of which he was Master; indeed, to all that sustained the empire itself, regardless of who sat upon the throne, regardless even of those savage, miserable barbarians who were now preening at the very pinnacle of Letherii society, like grey-feathered jackdaws atop a hoard of baubles.

Such comprehension, on Rautos Hivanar's part, would once have triggered a most zealous response within him. The threat alone should have sufficed to elicit a vigorous hunt, and the notion of an agency of such diabolical purpose – one, he was forced to admit, guided by the most subtle genius – should have enlivened the game until its pursuit acquired the power of obsession.

Instead, Rautos Hivanar found himself seeking notations among the dusty ledgers for evidence of past floodings, pursuing an altogether more mundane mystery that would interest but a handful of muttering academics. And that, he admitted often to himself, was odd. Nonetheless, the compulsion gathered strength, and at night he would lie beside the recumbent, sweat-sheathed mass that was his wife of thirty-three years and find his thoughts working ceaselessly, struggling against the currents of time's cyclical flow, seeking to clamber his way back, with all his sensibilities, into past ages. Looking. Looking for something . . .

Sighing, Rautos set down the empty cup, then rose.

As he walked to the door, Venitt Sathad – whose family line had been Indebted to the Hivanars for six generations now – stepped forward to retrieve the fragile cup, then set off in his master's wake.

Out onto the waterfront enclosure, across the mosaic portraying the investiture of Skoval Hivanar as Imperial Ceda three centuries past, then down the shallow stone stairs to what, in drier times, was the lower terrace garden. But the river's currents had swirled in here, stealing away soil and plants, exposing a most peculiar arrangement of boulders set like a cobbled street, framed in wooden posts arranged in a rectangle, the posts little more than rotted stumps now, rising from the flood's remnant pools.

At the edge of the upper level, workers, under Rautos's direction, had used wood bulwarks to keep it from collapsing, and to one side sat a wheelbarrow filled with the multitude of curious objects that had been exposed by the floodwaters. These items had littered the cobbled floor.

In all, Rautos mused, a mystery. There was no record whatsoever of the lower terrace garden's being anything but what it was, and the notations

from the garden's designer – from shortly after the completion of the estate's main buildings – indicated the bank at that level was nothing more than ancient flood silts.

The clay had preserved the wood, at least until recently, so there was no telling how long ago the strange construct had been built. The only indication of its antiquity rested with the objects, all of which were either bronze or copper. Not weapons, as one might find associated with a barrow, and if tools, then they were for activities long forgotten, since not a single worker Rautos had brought to this place was able to fathom the function of these items – they resembled no known tools, not for stone working, nor wood, nor the processing of foodstuffs.

Rautos collected one and examined it, for at least the hundredth time. Bronze, clay-cast – the flange was clearly visible – the item was long, roundish, yet bent at almost right angles. Incisions formed a cross-hatched pattern about the elbow. Neither end displayed any means of attachment – not intended, therefore, as part of some larger mechanism. He hefted its considerable weight in his hand. There was something imbalanced about it, despite the centrally placed bend. He set it down and drew out a circular sheet of copper, thinner than the wax layer on a scrier's tablet. Blackened by contact with the clays, yet only now the edges showing signs of verdigris. Countless holes had been punched through the sheet, in no particular pattern, yet each hole was perfectly uniform, perfectly round, with no lip to indicate from which side it had been punched.

'Venitt,' he said, 'have we a map recording the precise locations of these objects when they were originally found?'

'Indeed, Master, with but a few exceptions. You examined it a week past.'

'I did? Very well. Set it out once more on the table in the library, this afternoon.'

Both men turned as the gate watcher appeared from the narrow side passage along the left side of the house. The woman halted ten paces from Rautos and bowed. 'Master, a message from Invigilator Karos Invictad.'

'Very good,' Rautos replied distractedly. 'I will attend to it in a moment. Does the messenger await a response?'

'Yes, Master. He is in the courtyard.'

'See that refreshments are provided.'

The watcher bowed then departed.

'Venitt, I believe you must prepare to undertake a journey on my behalf.'

'Master?'

'The Invigilator at last perceives the magnitude of the threat.'

Venitt Sathad said nothing.

'You must travel to Drene City,' Rautos said, his eyes once more on the mysterious construct dominating the lower terrace. 'The Consign requires a most specific report of the preparations there. Alas, the Factor's own missives are proving unsatisfactory. I require confidence in those matters, if I am to apply fullest concentration to the threat closer to hand.'

Again, Venitt did not speak.

Rautos looked out onto the river. Fisher boats gathered in the bay opposite, two merchant traders drawing in towards the main docks. One of them, bearing the flag of the Esterrict family, looked damaged, possibly by fire. Rautos brushed the dirt from his hands and turned about, making his way back into the building, his servant falling into step behind him.

'I wonder, what lies beneath those stones?'

'Master?'

'Never mind, Venitt. I was but thinking out loud.'

The Awl'dan camp had been attacked at dawn by two troops of Atri-Preda Bivatt's Bluerose cavalry. Two hundred skilled lancers riding into a maelstrom of panic, as figures struggled out from the hide huts, as the Drene-bred wardogs, arriving moments before the horse-soldiers, closed on

the pack of Awl herder and dray dogs, and in moments the three breeds of beast were locked in a vicious battle.

The Awl warriors were unprepared, and few had time to even so much as find their weapons before the lancers burst into their midst. In moments, the slaughter extended out to encompass elders and children. Most of the women fought alongside their male kin – wife and husband, sister and brother, dying together in a last blending of blood.

The engagement between the Letherii and the Awl took all of two hundred heartbeats. The war among the dogs was far more protracted, for the herder dogs – while smaller and more compact than their attackers – were quick and no less vicious, while the drays, bred to pull carts in summer and sleds in winter, were comparable with the Drene breed. Trained to kill wolves, the drays proved more than a match for the wardogs, and if not for the lancers then making sport of killing the mottle-skinned beasts, the battle would have turned. As it was, the Awl pack finally broke away, the survivors fleeing onto the plain, eastward, a few Drene wardogs giving chase before being recalled by their handlers.

Whilst lancers dismounted to make certain there were no survivors among the Awl, others rode out to collect the herds of myrid and rodara in the next valley.

Atri-Preda Bivatt sat astride her stallion, struggling to control the beast with the smell of blood so heavy in the morning air. Beside her, sitting awkward and in discomfort on the unfamiliar saddle, Brohl Handar, the newly appointed Tiste Edur Overseer of Drene City, watched the Letherii systematically loot the encampment, stripping corpses naked and drawing their knives. The Awl bound their jewellery – mostly gold – deep in the braids of their hair, forcing the Letherii to slice away those sections of the scalp to claim their booty. Of course, there was more than just expedience in this mutilation, for it had been extended to the collecting of swaths of skin that had been decorated in tattoos, the particular style of the Awl rich in colour and often outlined in stitched gold thread. These trophies adorned the roundshields of many lancers.

The captured herds now belonged to the Factor of Drene, Letur Anict, and as Brohl Handar watched the hundreds of myrid come over the hill, their black woolly coats making them look like boulders as they poured down the hillside, it was clear that the Factor's wealth had just risen substantially. The taller rodara followed, blue-backed and long-necked, their long tails thrashing about in near-panic as wardogs on the herd's flanks plunged into feint attacks again and again.

The breath hissed from the Atri-Preda's teeth. 'Where is the Factor's man, anyway? Those damned rodara are going to stampede. Lieutenant! Get the handlers to call off their hounds! Hurry!' The woman unstrapped her helm, pulled it free and set it atop the saddle horn. She looked across at Brohl. 'There you have it, Overseer.'

'So these are the Awl.'

She grimaced, looked away. 'A small camp by their standards. Seventy-odd adults.'

'Yet, large herds.'

Her grimace became a scowl. 'They were once larger, Overseer. Much larger.'

'I take it then that this campaign of yours is succeeding in driving away these trespassers.'

'Not my campaign.' She seemed to catch something in his expression for she added, 'Yes, of course, I command the expeditionary forces, Overseer. But I receive my orders from the Factor. And, strictly speaking, the Awl are not trespassers.'

'The Factor claims otherwise.'

'Letur Anict is highly ranked in the Liberty Consign.'

Brohl Handar studied the woman for a moment, then said, 'Not all wars are fought for wealth and land, Atri-Preda.'

'I must disagree, Overseer. Did not you Tiste Edur invade pre-emptively, in response to the perceived threat of lost land and resources? Cultural

assimilation, the end of your independence. There is no doubt in my mind,' she continued, 'that we Letherii sought to obliterate your civilization, as we had done already with the Tarthenal and so many others. And so, an economic war.'

'It does not surprise me, Atri-Preda, that your kind saw it that way. And I do not doubt that such concerns were present in the mind of the Warlock King. Did we conquer you in order to survive? Perhaps.' Brohl considered saying more, then he shook his head, watching as four wardogs closed on a wounded cattle dog. The lame beast fought back, but was soon down, kicking, then silent and limp as the wardogs tore open its belly.

Bivatt asked, 'Do you ever wonder, Overseer, which of us truly won that war?'

He shot her a dark look. 'No, I do not. Your scouts have found no other signs of Awl in this area, I understand. So now the Factor will consolidate the Letherii claim in the usual fashion?'

The Atri-Preda nodded. 'Outposts. Forts, raised roads. Settlers will follow.'

'And then, the Factor will extend his covetous intentions, yet further east.'

'As you say, Overseer. Of course, I am sure you recognize the acquisitions gift the Tiste Edur as well. The empire's territory expands. I am certain the Emperor will be pleased.'

This was Brohl Handar's second week as governor of Drene. There were few Tiste Edur in this remote corner of Rhulad's empire, less than a hundred, and only his three staff members were from Brohl's own tribe, the Arapay. The annexation of Awl'dan by what amounted to wholesale genocide had begun years ago – long before the Edur conquest – and the particulars of rule in far Letheras seemed to have little relevance to this military campaign. Brohl Handar, the patriarch of a clan devoted to hunting tusked seals, wondered – not for the first time – what he was doing here.

Titular command as Overseer seemed to involve little more than observation. The true power of rule was with Letur Anict, the Factor of

Drene, who *'is highly ranked in the Liberty Consign'*. Some kind of guild of merchants, he had learned, although he had no idea what, precisely, was liberating about this mysterious organization. Unless, of course, it was the freedom to do as they pleased. Including the use of imperial troops to aid in the acquisition of ever more wealth.

'Atri-Preda.'

'Yes, Overseer?'

'These Awl – do they fight back? No, not as they did today. I mean, do they mount raids? Do they mass their warriors on the path to all-out war?'

She looked uncomfortable. 'Overseer, there are two . . . well, levels, to this.'

'Levels. What does that mean?'

'Official and . . . unofficial. It is a matter of perception.'

'Explain.'

'The belief of the common folk, as promulgated through imperial agents, is that the Awl have allied themselves with the Ak'ryn to the south, as well as the D'rhasilhani and the two kingdoms of Bolkando and Saphinand – in short, all the territories bordering the empire – creating a belligerent, warmongering and potentially overwhelming force – the Horde of the Bolkando Conspiracy – that threatens the entire eastern territories of the Lether Empire. It is only a matter of time before that horde is fully assembled, whereupon it will march. Accordingly, every attack launched by the Letherii military serves to diminish the numbers the Awl can contribute, and furthermore, the loss of valuable livestock in turn weakens the savages. Famine may well manage what swords alone cannot – the entire collapse of the Awl.'

'I see. And the unofficial version?'

She glanced across at him. 'There is no conspiracy, Overseer. No alliance. The truth is, the Awl continue to fight among themselves – their grazing land is shrinking, after all. And they despise the Ak'ryn and the

D'rhasilhani, and have probably never met anyone from Bolkando or Saphinand.' She hesitated, then said, 'We did clash with a mercenary company of some sort, two months past – the disastrous battle that spurred your appointment, I suspect. They numbered perhaps seven hundred, and after a half-dozen skirmishes I led a force of six thousand Letherii in pursuit. Overseer, we lost almost three thousand soldiers in that final battle. If not for our mages . . .' She shook her head. 'And we still have no idea who they were.'

Brohl studied the woman. He had known nothing about any such clash. The reason for his appointment? Perhaps. 'The official version you spoke of earlier – the lie – justifies the slaughter of the Awl, in the eyes of the commonry. All of which well serves the Factor's desire to make himself yet richer. I see. Tell me, Atri-Preda, why does Letur Anict need all that gold? What does he do with it?'

The woman shrugged. 'Gold is power.'

'Power over whom?'

'Anyone, and everyone.'

'Excepting the Tiste Edur, who are indifferent to the Letherii idea of wealth.'

She smiled. 'Are you, Overseer? Still?'

'What do you mean?'

'There are Hiroth in Drene – yes, you have met them. Each claims kinship with the Emperor, and upon that claim they have commandeered the finest estates and land. They have hundreds of Indebted as slaves. Soon, perhaps, there will be Tiste Edur among the membership of the Liberty Consign.'

Brohl Handar frowned. On a distant ridge stood three Awl dogs, two drays and one smaller cattle dog, watching as the herds were driven through the destroyed encampment – the livestock bawling in the stench of spilled blood and wastes. He studied the three silhouettes on the ridge. Where would they go now, he wondered. 'I have seen enough.' He tugged his horse

round, too tight on the reins, and the beast's head snapped up and it snorted, backing as it turned. Brohl struggled to keep his balance.

If the Atri-Preda was amused she was wise enough not to show it.

In the sky overhead, the first carrion birds had appeared.

The South Jasp River, one of the four tributaries of Lether River leading down from the Bluerose Mountains, was flanked on its south bank by a raised road that, a short distance ahead, began its long climb to the mountain pass, beyond which lay the ancient kingdom of Bluerose, now subject to the Letherii Empire. The South Jasp ran fast here, the momentum of its savage descent from the mountains not yet slowed by the vast plain it now found itself crossing. The icy water pounded over huge boulders left behind by long-extinct glaciers, flinging bitter-cold mist into the air that drifted in clouds over the road.

The lone figure awaiting the six Tiste Edur warriors and their entourage was if anything taller than any Edur, yet thin, wrapped in a black sealskin cloak, hood raised. Two baldrics criss-crossed its chest, from which hung two Letherii longswords, and the few wisps of long white hair that had pulled free in the wind were now wet, adhering to the collar of the cloak.

To the approaching Merude Edur, the face within that cowl looked pallid as death, as if a corpse had just dragged itself free of the numbing river, something long frozen in the white-veined reaches of the mountains that awaited them.

The lead warrior, a veteran of the conquest of Letheras, gestured for his comrades to halt then set out to speak to the stranger. In addition to the other five Edur, there were ten Letherii soldiers, two burdened wagons, and forty slaves shackled one to the next in a line behind the second wagon.

'Do you wish company,' the Merude asked, squinting to see more of that shadowed face, 'for the climb to the pass? It's said there remain bandits and renegades in the heights beyond.'

'I am my own company.'

The voice was rough, the accent archaic.

The Merude halted three paces away. He could see more of that face, now. Edur features, more or less, yet white as snow. The eyes were . . . unnerving. Red as blood. 'Then why do you block our path?'

'You captured two Letherii two days back. They are mine.'

The Merude shrugged. 'Then you should have kept them chained at night, friend. These Indebted will run at any opportunity. Fortunate for you that we captured them. Oh, yes – of course I will return them into your care. At least the girl – the man is an escaped slave from the Hiroth, or so his tattoos reveal. A Drowning awaits him, alas, but I will consider offering you a replacement. In any case, the girl, young as she is, is valuable. I trust you can manage the cost of retrieving her.'

'I will take them both. And pay you nothing.'

Frowning, the Merude said, 'You were careless in losing them. We were diligent in recapturing them. Accordingly, we expect compensation for our efforts, just as you should expect a certain cost for your carelessness.'

'Unchain them,' the stranger said.

'No. What tribe are you?' The eyes, still fixed unwavering upon his own, looked profoundly . . . *dead*. 'What has happened to your skin?' *As dead as the Emperor's*. 'What is your name?'

'Unchain them now.'

The Merude shook his head, then he laughed – a little weakly – and waved his comrades forward as he began drawing his cutlass.

Disbelief at the absurdity of the challenge slowed his effort. The weapon was halfway out of its scabbard when one of the stranger's longswords flashed clear of its sheath and opened the Edur's throat.

Shouting in rage, the other five warriors drew their blades and rushed forward, while the ten Letherii soldiers quickly followed suit.

The stranger watched the leader crumple to the ground, blood spurting wild into the river mist descending onto the road. Then he unsheathed his other longsword and stepped to meet the five Edur. A clash of iron, and all

at once the two Letherii weapons in the stranger's hands were singing, a rising timbre with every blow they absorbed.

Two Edur stumbled back at the same time, both mortally wounded, one in the chest, the other with a third of his skull sliced away. This latter one turned away as the fighting continued, reaching down to collect the fragment of scalp and bone, then walked drunkenly back along the road.

Another Edur fell, his left leg cut out from beneath him. The remaining two quickly backed away, yelling at the Letherii who were now hesitating three paces behind the fight.

The stranger pressed forward. He parried a thrust from the Edur on the right with the longsword in his left hand – sliding the blade under then over, drawing it leftward before a twist of his wrist tore the weapon from the attacker's hand; then a straight-arm thrust of his own buried his point in the Edur's throat. At the same time he reached over with the longsword in his right hand, feinting high. The last Edur leaned back to avoid that probe, attempting a slash aimed at clipping the stranger's wrist. But the longsword then deftly dipped, batting the cutlass away, even as the point drove up into the warrior's right eye socket, breaking the delicate orbital bones on its way into the forebrain.

Advancing between the two falling Edur, the stranger cut down the nearest two Letherii – at which point the remaining eight broke and ran, past the wagons – where the drivers were themselves scrambling in panicked abandonment – and then alongside the row of staring prisoners. Running, flinging weapons away, down the road.

As one Letherii in particular moved opposite one of the slaves, a leg kicked out, tripping the man, and it seemed the chain-line writhed then, as the ambushing slave leapt atop the hapless Letherii, loose chain wrapping round the neck, before the slave pulled it taut. Legs kicked, arms thrashed and hands clawed, but the slave would not relent, and eventually the guard's struggles ceased.

Silchas Ruin, the swords keening in his hands, walked up to where Udinaas continued strangling the corpse. 'You can stop now,' the albino

Tiste Andii said.

'I can,' Udinaas said through clenched teeth, 'but I won't. This bastard was the worst of them. The worst.'

'His soul even now drowns in the mist,' Silchas Ruin said, turning as two figures emerged from the brush lining the ditch on the south side of the road.

'Keep choking him,' said Kettle, from where she was chained farther down the line. 'He hurt me, that one.'

'I know,' Udinaas said in a grating voice. 'I know.'

Silchas Ruin approached Kettle. 'Hurt you. How?'

'The usual way,' she replied. 'With the thing between his legs.'

'And the other Letherii?'

The girl shook her head. 'They just watched. Laughing, always laughing.'

Silchas Ruin turned as Seren Pedac arrived.

Seren was chilled by the look in the Tiste Andii's uncanny eyes as Silchas Ruin said, 'I will pursue the ones who flee, Acquitor. And rejoin you all before day's end.'

She looked away, her gaze catching a momentary glimpse of Fear Sengar, standing over the corpses of the Merude Tiste Edur, then quickly on, to the rock-littered plain to the south – where still wandered the Tiste Edur who'd lost a third of his skull. But that sight as well proved too poignant. 'Very well,' she said, now squinting at the wagons and the horses standing in their yokes. 'We will continue on this road.'

Udinaas had finally expended his rage on the Letherii body beneath him, and he rose to face her. 'Seren Pedac, what of the rest of these slaves? We must free them all.'

She frowned. Exhaustion was making thinking difficult. Months and months of hiding, fleeing, eluding both Edur and Letherii; of finding their efforts to head eastward blocked again and again, forcing them ever

northward, and the endless terror that lived within her, had driven all acuity from her thoughts. *Free them. Yes. But then . . .*

'Just more rumours,' Udinaas said, as if reading her mind, as if finding her thoughts before she did. 'There's plenty of those, confusing our hunters. Listen, Seren, they already know where we are, more or less. And these slaves – they'll do whatever they can to avoid recapture. We need not worry overmuch about them.'

She raised her brows. 'You vouch for your fellow Indebted, Udinaas? All of whom will turn away from a chance to buy their way clear with vital information, yes?'

'The only alternative, then,' he said, eyeing her, 'is to kill them all.'

The ones listening, the ones not yet beaten down into mindless automatons, suddenly raised their voices in proclamations and promises, reaching out towards Seren, chains rattling. The others looked up in fear, like myrid catching scent of a wolf they could not see. Some cried out, cowering in the stony mud of the road.

'The first Edur he killed,' said Udinaas, 'has the keys.'

Silchas Ruin had walked down the road. Barely visible in the mist, the Tiste Andii veered into something huge, winged, then took to the air. Seren glanced over at the row of slaves – none had seen that, she was relieved to note. 'Very well,' she said in answer to Udinaas, and she walked up to where Fear Sengar still stood near the dead Edur.

'I must take the keys,' she said, crouching beside the first fallen Edur.

'Do not touch him,' Fear said.

She looked up at him. 'The keys – the chains—'

'I will find them,' he said.

Nodding, she straightened, then stepped back. Watched as he spoke a silent prayer, then settled onto his knees beside the body. He found the keys in a leather pouch tied to the warrior's belt, a pouch that also contained a handful of polished stones. Fear took the keys in his left hand and held the

stones in the palm of his right. 'These,' he said, 'are from the Merude shore. Likely he collected them when but a child.'

'Children grow up,' Seren said. 'Even straight trees spawn crooked branches.'

'And what was flawed in this warrior?' Fear demanded, glaring up at her. 'He followed my brother, as did every other warrior of the tribes.'

'Some eventually turned away, Fear.' *Like you*.

'What I have turned away from lies in the shadow of what I am now turned towards, Acquitor. Does this challenge my loyalty towards the Tiste Edur? My own kind? No. That is something all of you forget, conveniently so, again and again. Understand me, Acquitor. I will hide if I must, but I will not kill my own people. We had the coin, we could have bought their freedom—'

'Not Udinaas.'

He bared his teeth, said nothing.

*Yes, Udinaas, the one man you dream of killing. If not for Silchas Ruin . . .*
'Fear Sengar,' she said. 'You have chosen to travel with us, and there can be no doubt – none at all – that Silchas Ruin commands this meagre party. Dislike his methods if you must, but he alone will see you through. You know this.'

The Hiroth warrior looked away, back down the road, blinking the water from his eyes. 'And with each step, the cost of my quest becomes greater – an indebtedness you should well understand, Acquitor. The Letherii way of living, the burdens you can never escape. Nor purchase your way clear.'

She reached out for the keys.

He set them into her hand, unwilling to meet her eyes.

*We're no different from those slaves.* She hefted the weight of the jangling iron in her hand. *Chained together. Yet . . . who holds the means of our release?*

'Where has he gone?' Fear asked.

'To hunt down the Letherii. I trust you do not object to that.'

'No, but you should, Acquitor.'

*I suppose I should at that*. She set off to where waited the slaves.

A prisoner near Udinaas had crawled close to him, and Seren heard his whispered question: 'That tall slayer – was that the White Crow? He was, wasn't he? I have heard—'

'You have heard nothing,' Udinaas said, raising his arms as Seren approached. 'The three-edged one,' he said to her. 'Yes, that one. Errant take us, you took your time.'

She worked the key until the first shackle clicked open. 'You two were supposed to be stealing from a farm – not getting rounded up by slave-trackers.'

'Trackers camped on the damned grounds – no-one was smiling on us that night.'

She opened the other shackle and Udinaas stepped out from the line, rubbing at the red weals round his wrists. Seren said, 'Fear sought to dissuade Silchas – you know, if those two are any indication, it's no wonder the Edur and the Andii fought ten thousand wars.'

Udinaas grunted as the two made their way to where stood Kettle. 'Fear resents his loss of command,' he said. 'That it is to a Tiste Andii just makes it worse. He's still not convinced the betrayal was the other way round all those centuries back; that it was Scabandari who first drew the knife.'

Seren Pedac said nothing. As she moved in front of Kettle she looked down at the girl's dirt-smeared face, the ancient eyes slowly lifting to meet her own.

Kettle smiled. 'I missed you.'

'How badly were you used?' Seren asked as she removed the large iron shackles.

'I can walk. And the bleeding's stopped. That's a good sign, isn't it?'

'Probably.' But this talk of rape was unwelcome – Seren had her own memories haunting her every waking moment. 'There will be scars, Kettle.'

'Being alive is hard. I'm always hungry, and my feet hurt.'

*I hate children with secrets – especially ones with secrets they're not even aware of. Find the right questions; there's no other way of doing this*. 'What else bothers you about being among the living again, Kettle?' *And . . . how? Why?*

'Feeling small.'

Seren's right arm was plucked by a slave, an old man who reached out for the keys with pathetic hope in his eyes. She handed them to him. 'Free the others,' she said. He nodded vigorously, scrabbling at his shackles. 'Now,' Seren said to Kettle, 'that's a feeling we all must accept. Too much of the world defies our efforts to conform to what would please us. To live is to know dissatisfaction and frustration.'

'I still want to tear out throats, Seren. Is that bad? I think it must be.'

At Kettle's words, the old man shrank away, redoubling his clumsy attempts at releasing himself. Behind him a woman cursed with impatience.

Udinaas had climbed onto the bed of the lead wagon and was busy looting it for whatever they might need. Kettle scrambled to join him.

'We need to move out of this mist,' Seren muttered. 'I'm soaked through.' She walked towards the wagon. 'Hurry up with that, you two. If more company finds us here, we could be in trouble.' *Especially now that Silchas Ruin is gone*. The Tiste Andii had been the singular reason for their survival thus far. When hiding and evading the searchers failed, his two swords found voice, the eerie song of obliteration. *The White Crow*.

It had been a week since they last caught sight of Edur and Letherii who were clearly hunters. Seeking the traitor, Fear Sengar. Seeking the betrayer, Udinaas. Yet Seren Pedac was bemused – there should have been entire armies chasing them. While the pursuit was persistent, it was dogged rather

than ferocious in its execution. Silchas had mentioned, once, in passing, that the Emperor's K'risnan were working ritual sorceries, the kind that sought to lure and trap. And that snares awaited them to the east, and round Letheras itself. She could understand those to the east, for it was the wild lands beyond the empire that had been their destination all along, where Fear – for some reason he did not care to explain – believed he would find what he sought; a belief that Silchas Ruin did not refute. But to surround the capital city itself baffled Seren. *As if Rhulad is frightened of his brother.*

Udinaas leapt down from the lead wagon and made his way to the second one. 'I found coin,' he said. 'Lots. We should take these horses, too – we can sell them once we're down the other side of the pass.'

'There is a fort at the pass,' Seren said. 'It may be ungarrisoned, but there's no guarantee of that, Udinaas. If we arrive with horses – and they recognize them . . .'

'We go round that fort,' he replied. 'At night. Unseen.'

She frowned, wiped water from her eyes. 'Easier done without horses. Besides, these beasts are old, too broken – they won't earn us much, especially in Bluerose. And when Wyval returns they'll probably die of terror.'

'Wyval's not coming back,' Udinaas said, turning away, his voice grating. 'Wyval's gone, and that's that.'

She knew she should not doubt him. The dragon-spawn's spirit had dwelt within him, after all. Yet there was no obvious explanation for the winged beast's sudden disappearance, at least none that Udinaas would share. Wyval had been gone for over a month.

Udinaas swore from where he crouched atop the bed of the wagon. 'Nothing here but weapons.'

'Weapons?'

'Swords, shields and armour.'

'Letherii?'

'Yes. Middling quality.'

'What were these slavers doing with a wagon load of weapons?'

Shrugging, he climbed back down, hurried past her and began unhitching the horses. 'These beasts would've had a hard time on the ascent.'

'Silchas Ruin is coming back,' Kettle said, pointing down the road.

'That was fast.'

Udinaas laughed harshly, then said, 'The fools should have scattered, made him hunt each one down separately. Instead, they probably regrouped, like the stupid good soldiers they were.'

From near the front wagon, Fear Sengar spoke. 'Your blood is very thin, Udinaas, isn't it?'

'Like water,' the ex-slave replied.

*For Errant's sake, Fear, he did not choose to abandon your brother. You know that. Nor is he responsible for Rhulad's madness. So how much of your hatred for Udinaas comes from guilt? Who truly is to blame for Rhulad? For the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths?*

The white-skinned Tiste Andii strode from the mists, an apparition, his black cloak glistening like snakeskin. Swords sheathed once more, muting their cries – iron voices reluctant to fade, they would persist for days, now.

How she hated that sound.

Tanal Yathvanar stood looking down at the naked woman on his bed. The questioners had worked hard on her, seeking the answers they wanted. She was badly broken, her skin cut and burned, her joints swollen and mottled with bruises. She had been barely conscious when he'd used her last night. This was easier than whores, and cost him nothing besides. He wasn't much interested in beating his women, just in seeing them beaten. He understood his desire was perversion, but this organization – the Patriotists – was the perfect haven for people like him. Power and immunity, a most deadly combination. He suspected that Karos Invictad was well aware of Tanal's nightly escapades, and held that knowledge like a sheathed knife.

*It's not as if I've killed her. It's not as if she'll even remember this. She's destined for the Drownings in any case – what matter if I take some pleasure first? Soldiers do the same*. He had dreamed of being a soldier once, years ago, when in his youth he had held to misguided, romantic notions of heroism and unconstrained freedom, as if the first justified the second. There had been many noble killers in the history of Lether. Gerun Eberict had been such a man. He'd murdered thousands – thieves, thugs and wastrels, the depraved and the destitute. He had *cleansed* the streets of Letheras, and who had not indulged in the rewards? Fewer beggars, fewer pickpockets, fewer homeless and all the other decrepit failures of the modern age. Tanal admired Gerun Eberict – he had been a great man. Murdered by a thug, his skull crushed to pulp – a tragic loss, senseless and cruel.

*One day we shall find that killer.*

He turned away from the unconscious woman, adjusted his light tunic so that the shoulder seams were even and straight, then closed the clasps of his weapon belt. One of the Invigilator's requirements for all officers of the Patriotists: belt, dagger and shortsword. Tanal liked the weight of them, the authority implicit in the privilege of wearing arms where all other Letherii – barring soldiers – were forbidden by proclamation of the Emperor.

*As if we might rebel. The damned fool thinks he won that war. They all do. Dimwitted barbarians.*

Tanal Yathvanar walked to the door, stepped out into the corridor, and made his way towards the Invigilator's office. The second bell after midday sounded a moment before he knocked on the door. A murmured invitation bade him enter.

He found Rautos Hivanar, Master of the Liberty Consign, already seated opposite Karos Invictad. The large man seemed to fill half the room, and Tanal noted that the Invigilator had pushed his own chair as far back as possible, so that it was tilted against the sill of the window. In this space on his side of the desk, Karos attempted a posture of affable comfort.

'Tanal, our guest is being most insistent with respect to his suspicions. Sufficient to convince me that we must devote considerable attention to finding the source of the threat.'

'Invigilator, is the intent sedition or treason, or are we dealing with a thief?'

'A thief, I should think,' Karos replied, glancing over at Rautos Hivanar.

The man's cheeks bulged, before he released a slow sigh. 'I am not so sure. On the surface, we appear to be facing an obsessive individual, consumed by greed and, accordingly, hoarding wealth. But only as actual coin, and this is why it is proving so difficult to find a trail. No properties, no ostentation, no flouting of privilege. Now, as subtle consequence, the shortage of coin is finally noticeable. True, no actual damage to the empire's financial structure has occurred. Yet. But, if the depletion continues,' he shook his head, 'we will begin to feel the strain.'

Tanal cleared his throat, then asked, 'Master, have you assigned agents of your own to investigate the situation?'

Rautos frowned. 'The Liberty Consign thrives precisely because its members hold to the conviction of being the most powerful players in an unassailable system. Confidence is a most fragile quality, Tanal Yathvanar. Granted, a few who deal specifically in finances have brought to me their concerns. Druz Thennict, Barrakta Ilk, for example. But there is nothing as yet formalized – no true suspicion that something is awry. Neither man is a fool, however.' He glanced out of the window behind Karos Invictad. 'The investigation must be conducted by the Patriotists, in utmost secrecy.' The heavy-lidded eyes lowered, settling on the Invigilator. 'I understand that you have been targeting academics and scholars of late.'

A modest shrug and lift of the brows from Karos Invictad. 'The many paths of treason.'

'Some are members of established and respected families in Lether.'

'No, Rautos, not the ones we have arrested.'

'True, but those unfortunate victims have friends, Invigilator, who have in turn appealed to me.'

'Well, my friend, this is delicate indeed. You tread now on the thinnest skin of ground, with naught but mud beneath.' He sat forward, folding his hands on the desk. 'But I shall look into it nonetheless. Perhaps the recent spate of arrests has succeeded in quelling the disenchantment among the learned, or at least culled the most egregious of their lot.'

'Thank you, Invigilator. Now, who will conduct your investigation?'

'Why, I will attend to this personally.'

'Venitt Sathad, my assistant who awaits in the courtyard below, can serve as liaison between your organization and myself for this week; thereafter, I will assign someone else.'

'Very good. Weekly reports should suffice, at least to start.'

'Agreed.'

Rautos Hivanar rose, and after a moment Karos Invictad followed suit.

The office was suddenly very cramped, and Tanal edged back, angry at the intimidation he felt instinctively rising within him. *I have nothing to fear from Rautos Hivanar. Nor Karos. I am their confidant, the both of them. They trust me.*

Karos Invictad was a step behind Rautos, one hand on the man's back as the Master opened the door. As soon as Rautos stepped into the hallway, Karos smiled and said a few last words to the man, who grunted in reply, and then the Invigilator closed the door and turned to face Tanal.

'One of those well-respected academics is now staining your sheets, Yathvanar.'

Tanal blinked. 'Sir, she was sentenced to the Drowning—'

'Revoke the punishment. Get her cleaned up.'

'Sir, it may well be that she will recall—'

'A certain measure of restraint,' Karos Invictad said in a cold tone, 'is required from you, Tanal Yathvanar. Arrest some daughters of those already in chains, damn you, and have your fun with them. Am I understood?'

'Y-yes sir. If she remembers—'

'Then restitution will be necessary, won't it? I trust you keep your own finances in order, Yathvanar. Now, begone from my sight.'

As Tanal closed the door behind him, he struggled to draw breath. *The bastard. There was no warning off her, was there? Whose mistake was all this? Yet, you think to make me pay for it. All of it. Blade and Axe take you, Invictad, I won't suffer alone.*

*I won't.*

'Depravity holds a certain fascination, don't you think?'

'No.'

'After all, the sicker the soul, the sweeter its comeuppance.'

'Assuming there is one.'

'There's a centre point, I'm sure of it. And it should be dead centre, by my calculations. Perhaps the fulcrum itself is flawed.'

'What calculations?'

'Well, the ones I asked you to do for me, of course. Where are they?'

'They're on my list.'

'And how do you calculate the order of your list?'

'That's not the calculation you asked for.'

'Good point. Anyway, if he'd just hold all his legs still, we could properly test my hypothesis.'

'He doesn't want to, and I can see why. You're trying to balance him at the mid-point of his body, but he's designed to hold that part up, with all those legs.'

'Are those formal observations? If so, make a note.'

'On what? We had the wax slab for lunch.'

'No wonder I feel I could swallow a cow with nary a hiccough. Look! Hah! He's perched! Perfectly perched!'

Both men leaned in to examine Ezgara, the insect with a head at each end. Not unique, of course, there were plenty around these days, filling some arcane niche in the complicated miasma of nature, a niche that had been vacant for countless millennia. The creature's broken-twig legs kicked out helplessly.

'You're torturing him,' said Bugg, 'with clear depravity, Tehol.'

'It only seems that way.'

'No, it is that way.'

'All right, then.' Tehol reached down and plucked the hapless insect from the fulcrum. Its heads swivelled about. 'Anyway,' he said as he peered closely at the creature, 'that wasn't the depravity I was talking about. How goes the construction business, by the way?'

'Sinking fast.'

'Ah. Is that an affirmation or decried destitution?'

'We're running out of buyers. No hard coin, and I'm done with credit, especially when it turns out the developers can't sell the properties. So I've had to lay everyone off, including myself.'

'When did all this happen?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Typical. I'm always the last to hear. Is Ezgara hungry, do you think?'

'He ate more wax than you did – where do you think all the waste goes?'

'His or mine?'

'Master, I already know where yours goes, and if Biri ever finds out—'

'Not another word, Bugg. Now, by my observations, and according to the notations you failed to make, Ezgara has consumed food equivalent in weight to a drowned cat. Yet he remains tiny, spry, fit, and thanks to our wax lunch today his heads no longer squeak when they swivel, which I take to be a good sign, since now we won't be woken up a hundred times a night.'

'Master.'

'Yes?'

'How do you know how much a drowned cat weighs?'

'Selush, of course.'

'I don't understand.'

'You must remember. Three years ago. That feral cat netted in the Rinnesict Estate, the one raping a flightless ornamental duck. It was sentenced to Drowning.'

'A terrible demise for a cat. Yes, I remember now. The yowl heard across the city.'

'That's the one. Some unnamed benefactor took pity on the sodden feline corpse, paying Selush a small fortune to dress the beast for proper burial.'

'You must be mad. Who would do that and why?'

'For ulterior motives, obviously. I wanted to know how much a drowned cat weighs, of course. Otherwise, how valid the comparison? Descriptively, I've been waiting to use it for years.'

'Three.'

'No, much longer. Hence my curiosity, and opportunism. Prior to that cat's watery end, I feared voicing the comparison, which, lacking veracity on my part, would invite ridicule.'

'You're a tender one, aren't you?'

'Don't tell anyone.'

'Master, about those vaults.'

'What about them?'

'I think extensions are required.'

Tehol used the tip of his right index finger to stroke the insect's back – or, alternatively, rub it the wrong way. 'Already? Well, how far under the river are you right now?'

'More than halfway.'

'And that is how many?'

'Vaults? Sixteen. Each one three man-heights by two.'

'All filled?'

'All.'

'Oh. So presumably it's starting to hurt.'

'Bugg's Construction will be the first major enterprise to collapse.'

'And how many will it drag down with it?'

'No telling. Three, maybe four.'

'I thought you said there was no telling.'

'So don't tell anyone.'

'Good idea. Bugg, I need you to build me a box, to very specific specifications which I'll come up with later.'

'A box, Master. Wood good enough?'

'What kind of sentence is that? Would good enough.'

'No, wood, you know, the burning kind.'

'Yes, would that wood will do.'

'Size?'

'Absolutely. But no lid.'

'Finally, you're getting specific.'

'I told you I would.'

'What's this box for, Master?'

'I can't tell you, alas. Not specifically. But I need it soon.'

'About the vaults . . .'

'Make ten more, Bugg. Double the size. As for Bugg's Construction, hold on for a while longer, amass debt, evade the creditors, keep purchasing materials and stockpiling them in storage buildings charging exorbitant rent. Oh, and embezzle all you can.'

'I'll lose my head.'

'Don't worry. Ezgara here has one to spare.'

'Why, thank you.'

'Doesn't even squeak, either.'

'That's a relief. What are you doing now, Master?'

'What's it look like?'

'You're going back to bed.'

'And you need to build a box, Bugg, a most clever box. Remember, though, no lid.'

'Can I at least ask what it's for?'

Tehol settled back on his bed, studied the blue sky overhead for a moment, then smiled over at his manservant – who just happened to be an Elder God. 'Why, comeuppance, Bugg, what else?'

# CHAPTER TWO

> The waking moment awaits us all upon a threshold
> or where the road turns if life is pulled, sparks like
> moths inward to this single sliver of time gleaming
> like sunlight on water, we will accrete into a mass
> made small, veined with fears and shot through
> with all that's suddenly precious, and the now is
> swallowed, the weight of self a crushing
> immediacy, on this day, where the road turns,
> comes the waking moment.
>
> *Winter Reflections*
> Corara of Drene

The ascent to the summit began where the Letheriibuilt road ended. With the river voicing its ceaseless roar fifteen paces to their left, the roughly shaped pavestones vanished beneath a black-stoned slide at the base of a moraine. Uprooted trees reached bent and twisted arms up through the rubble, jutting limbs from which hung root tendrils, dripping water. Swaths of forest climbed the mountainside to the north, on the other side of the river, and the ragged cliffs edging the tumbling water on that side were verdant with moss. The opposite mountain, flanking the trail, was a stark contrast, latticed with fissures, broken, gouged and mostly treeless. In the midst of this shattered façade shadows marked out odd regularities, of line and angle; and upon the trail itself, here and there, broad worn steps had been carved, eroded by flowing water and centuries of footfalls.

Seren Pedac believed that a city had once occupied the entire mountainside, a vertical fortress carved into living stone. She could make out what she thought were large gaping windows, and possibly the fragmented ledges of balconies high up, hazy in the mists. Yet something – something huge, terrible in its monstrosity – had impacted the entire side of the mountain, obliterating most of the city in a single blow. She could

almost discern the outline of that collision, yet among the screes of rubble tracking down the sundered slopes the only visible stone belonged to the mountain itself.

They stood at the base of the trail. Seren watched the lifeless eyes of the Tiste Andii slowly scan upward.

'Well?' she asked.

Silchas Ruin shook his head. 'Not from my people. K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'A victim of your war?'

He glanced across at her, as if gauging the emotion behind her question, then said, 'Most of the mountains from which the K'Chain Che'Malle carved their sky keeps are now beneath the waves, inundated following the collapse of Omtose Phellack. The cities are cut into the stone, although only in the very earliest versions are they as you see here – open to the air rather than buried within shapeless rock.'

'An elaboration suggesting a sudden need for self-defence.'

He nodded.

Fear Sengar had moved past them and was beginning the ascent. After a moment Udinaas and Kettle followed. Seren had prevailed in her insistence to leave the horses behind. In a clearing off to their right sat four wagons covered with tarps. It was clear that no such contrivance could manage this climb, and all transport from here on was by foot. As for the mass of weapons and armour the slavers had been conveying, either it would have been stashed here, awaiting a hauling crew, or the slaves would have been burdened like mules.

'I have never made this particular crossing,' Seren said, 'although I have viewed this mountainside from a distance. Even then, I thought I could see evidence of reshaping. I once asked Hull Beddict about it, but he would tell me nothing. At some point, however, I think our trail takes us inside.'

'The sorcery that destroyed this city was formidable,' Silchas Ruin said.

'Perhaps some natural force—' 'No, Acquitor. Starvald Demelain. The destruction was the work of dragons. Eleint of the pure blood. At least a dozen, working in concert, a combined unleashing of their warrens. Unusual,' he added.

'Which part?'

'Such a large alliance, for one. Also, the extent of their rage. I wonder what crime the K'Chain Che'Malle committed to warrant such retaliation.'

'I know the answer to that,' came a sibilant whisper from behind them, and Seren turned, squinted down at the insubstantial wraith crouched there.

'Wither. I was wondering where you had gone to.'

'Journeys into the heart of the stone, Seren Pedac. Into the frozen blood. What was their crime, you wonder, Silchas Ruin? Why, nothing less than the assured annihilation of all existence. If extinction awaited them, then so too would all else die. Desperation, or evil spite? Perhaps neither, perhaps a terrible accident, that wounding at the centre of it all. But what do we care? We shall all be dust by then. Indifferent. Insensate.'

Silchas Ruin said, without turning, 'Beware the frozen blood, Wither. It can still take you.'

The wraith hissed a laugh. 'Like an ant to sap, yes. Oh, but it is so seductive, Master.'

'You have been warned. If you are snared, I cannot free you.'

The wraith slithered past them, flowed up the ragged steps.

Seren adjusted the leather satchel on her shoulders. 'The Fent carried supplies balanced on their heads. Would that I could do the same.'

'The vertebrae become compacted,' Silchas Ruin said, 'resulting in chronic pain.'

'Well, mine are feeling rather crunched right now, so I'm afraid I don't see much difference.' She began the climb. 'You know, as a Soletaken, you could just—'

'No,' he said as he followed, 'there is too much bloodlust in the veering. The draconean hunger within me is where lives my anger, and that anger is not easily contained.'

She snorted, unable to help herself.

'You are amused, Acquitor?'

'Scabandari is dead. Fear has seen his shattered skull. You were stabbed and then imprisoned, and now that you are free, all that consumes you is the desire for vengeance – against what? Some incorporeal soul? Something less than a wraith? What will be left of Scabandari by now? Silchas Ruin, yours is a pathetic obsession. At least Fear Sengar seeks something positive – not that he'll find it since you will probably annihilate what's left of Scabandari before he gets a chance to talk to it, assuming that's even possible.' When he said nothing, she continued, 'It seems I am now fated to guiding such quests. Just like my last journey, the one that took me to the lands of the Tiste Edur. Everyone at odds, motives hidden and in conflict. My task was singular, of course: deliver the fools, then stand well back as the knives are drawn.'

'Acquitor, my anger is more complicated than you believe.'

'What does that mean?'

'The future you set before us is too simple, too confined. I suspect that when we arrive at our destination, nothing will proceed as you anticipate.'

She grunted. 'I will accept that, since it was without doubt the case in the village of the Warlock King. After all, the fallout was the conquest of the Letherii Empire.'

'Do you take responsibility for that, Acquitor?'

'I take responsibility for very little, Silchas Ruin. That much must be obvious.'

The steps were steep, the edges worn and treacherous. As they climbed, the air thinned, mists swirling in from the tumbling falls on their left, the sound a roar that clambered among the stones in a tumult of echoes. Where

the ancient stairs vanished entirely, wooden trestles had been constructed, forming something between a ladder and steps against the sheer, angled rock.

They found a ledge a third of the way up where they could gather to rest. Among the scatter of rubble on the shelf were remnants of metopes, cornices and friezes bearing carvings too fragmented to be identifiable – suggesting that an entire façade had once existed directly above them. The scaffolding became a true ladder here, and off to the right, three man-heights up, gaped the mouth of a cave, rectangular, almost door-shaped.

Udinaas stood regarding that dark portal for a long time, before he turned to the others. 'I suggest we try it.'

'There is no need, slave,' replied Fear Sengar. 'This trail is straightforward, reliable—'

'And getting icier the higher we go.' The Indebted grimaced, then laughed. 'Oh, there're songs to be sung, are there, Fear? The perils and tribulations, the glories of suffering, all to win your heroic triumph. You want the elders who were once your grandchildren to gather the clan round the fire, for the telling of your tale, a lone warrior's quest for his god. I can almost hear them now, describing the formidable Fear Sengar of the Hiroth, brother to the Emperor, with his train of followers – the lost child, the inveterate Letherii guide, a ghost, a slave and of course the white-skinned nemesis. The White Crow with his silver-tongued lies. Oh, we have here the gamut of archetypes, yes?' He reached into the satchel beside him and drew out a waterskin, took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'But imagine all of it going for naught, when you pitch from a slippery rung and plunge five hundred man-heights to your ignominious death. Not how the story goes, alas, but then, life isn't a story now, is it?' He replaced the skin and shouldered his pack. 'The embittered slave chooses a different route to the summit, the fool. But then,' he paused to grin back at Fear, 'somebody has to be the moral lesson in this epic, right?'

Seren watched the man climbing the rungs. When he came opposite the cave mouth, he reached out until one hand gripped the edge of stone, then followed with a foot, stretching until the probing tip of his moccasin settled

on the ledge. Then, in a swift shifting of weight, combined with a push away from the ladder, he fluidly spun on one leg, the other swinging over empty air. Then stepping inward, pulled by the weight of the satchel on his back, into the gloom of the entrance.

'Nicely done,' Silchas Ruin commented, and there was something like amusement in his tone, as if he had enjoyed the slave's poking at Fear Sengar's sententious self-importance, thus revealing two edges to his observation. 'I am of a mind to follow him.'

'Me, too,' said Kettle.

Seren Pedac sighed. 'Very well, but I suggest we use ropes between us, and leave the showing off to Udinaas.'

The mouth of the cave revealed that it had been a corridor, probably leading out onto a balcony before the façade had sheared off. Massive sections of the walls, riven through with cracks, had shifted, settled at conflicting angles. And every crevasse, every fissure on all sides that Seren could see, seethed with the squirming furred bodies of bats, awakened now to their presence, chittering and moments from panic. As Seren set her pack down, Udinaas moved beside her.

'Here,' he said, his breath pluming, 'light this lantern, Acquitor – when the temperature drops my hands start going numb.' At her look he glanced over at Fear Sengar, then said, 'Too many years reaching down into icy water. A slave among the Edur knows little comfort.'

'You were fed,' Fear Sengar said.

'When a bloodwood tree toppled in the forest,' Udinaas said, 'we'd be sent out to drag it back to the village. Do you remember those times, Fear? Sometimes the trunk would shift unexpectedly, slide in mud or whatever, and crush a slave. One of them was from our own household – you don't recall him, do you? What's one more dead slave? You Edur would shout out when that happened, saying the bloodwood spirit was thirsty for Letherii blood.'

'Enough, Udinaas,' Seren said, finally succeeding in lighting the lantern. As the illumination burgeoned, the bats exploded from the cracks and suddenly the air was filled with frantic, beating wings. A dozen heartbeats later the creatures were gone.

She straightened, raising the lantern.

They stood on a thick mouldy paste – guano, crawling with grubs and beetles – from which rose a foul stench.

'We'd better move in,' Seren said, 'and get clear of this. There are fevers . . .'

The man was screaming as the guards dragged him by his chains, across the courtyard to the ring-wall. His crushed feet left bloody smears on the pavestones. Screams of accusation wailed from him, shrill outrage at the shaping of the world – the Letherii world.

Tanal Yathvanar snorted softly. 'Hear him. Such naivety.'

Karos Invictad, standing beside him on the balcony, gave him a sharp look. 'You foolish man, Tanal Yathvanar.'

'Invigilator?'

Karos Invictad leaned his forearms on the railing and squinted down at the prisoner. Fingers like bloated riverworms slowly entwined. From somewhere overhead a gull was laughing. 'Who poses the greatest threat to the empire, Yathvanar?'

'Fanatics,' Tanal replied after a moment. 'Like that one below.'

'Incorrect. Listen to his words. He is possessed of certainty. He holds to a secure vision of the world, a man with the correct answers – that the prerequisite questions were themselves the correct ones goes without saying. A citizen with certainty, Yathvanar, can be swayed, turned, can be made into a most diligent ally. All one needs to do is find what threatens them the most. Ignite their fear, burn to cinders the foundations of their certainty, then offer an equally certain alternate way of thinking, of seeing the world. They will reach across, no matter how wide the gulf, and grasp

and hold on to you with all their strength. No, the certain are not our enemies. Presently misguided, as in the case of the man below, but always most vulnerable to fear. Take away the comfort of their convictions, then coax them with seemingly cogent and reasonable convictions of our own making. Their eventual embrace is assured.'

'I see.'

'Tanal Yathvanar, our greatest enemies are those who are without certainty. The ones with questions, the ones who regard our tidy answers with unquenchable scepticism. Those questions assail us, undermine us. They . . . agitate. Understand, these dangerous citizens understand that nothing is simple; their stance is the very opposite of naivety. They are humbled by the ambivalence to which they are witness, and they defy our simple, comforting assertions of clarity, of a black and white world. Yathvanar, when you wish to deliver the gravest insult to such a citizen, call them naive. You will leave them incensed; indeed, virtually speechless . . . until you watch their minds back-tracking, revealed by a cascade of expressions, as they ask themselves: who is it that would call me naive? Well, comes the answer, clearly a person possessing certainty, with all the arrogance and pretension that position entails; a confidence, then, that permits the offhand judgement, the derisive dismissal uttered from a most lofty height. And from all this, into your victim's eyes will come the light of recognition – in you he faces his enemy, his truest enemy. And he will know fear. Indeed, terror.'

'You invite the question, then, Invigilator . . .'

Karos Invictad smiled. 'Do I possess certainty? Or am I in fact plagued by questions, doubts, do I flounder in the wild currents of complexity?' He was silent for a moment, then he said, 'I hold to but one certainty. Power shapes the face of the world. In itself, it is neither benign nor malicious, it is simply the tool by which its wielder reshapes all that is around him or herself, reshapes it to suit his or her own . . . comforts. Of course, to express power is to enact tyranny, which can be most subtle and soft, or cruel and hard. Implicit in power – political, familial, as you like – is the threat of coercion. Against all who choose to resist. And know this: if coercion is available, it

*will* be used.' He gestured. 'Listen to that man. He does my work for me. Down in the dungeons, his cellmates hear his ravings, and some among them join in chorus – the guards take note of who, and that is a list of names I peruse daily, for they are the ones I can win over. The ones who say nothing, or turn away, now that is the list of those who *must* die.'

'So,' said Tanal, 'we let him scream.'

'Yes. The irony is, he truly is naive, although not of course as you originally meant. It is his very certainty that reveals his blithe ignorance. It is a further irony that both extremes of the political spectrum reveal a convergence of the means and methods and indeed the very attitudes of the believers – their ferocity against naysayers, the blood they willingly spill for their cause, defending their version of reality. The hatred they reveal for those who voice doubts. Scepticism disguises contempt, after all, and to be held in contempt by one who holds to nothing is to feel the deepest, most cutting wound. And so we who hold to certainty, Yathvanar, soon find it our mission to root out and annihilate the questioners. And my, the pleasure we derive from that . . .'

Tanal Yathvanar said nothing, inundated with a storm of suspicions, none of which he could isolate, chase down.

Karos Invictad said, 'You were so quick to judge, weren't you? Ah, you revealed so much with that contemptuous utterance. And I admit to being amused at my own instinctive response to your words. *Naive*. Errant take me, I wanted to rip your head from your body, like decapitating a swamp-fly. I wanted to show you true contempt. Mine. For you and your kind. I wanted to take that dismissive expression on your face and push it through an offal grinder. You think you have all the answers? You must, given the ease of your voiced judgement. Well, you pathetic little creature, one day uncertainty will come to your door, will clamber down your throat, and it will be a race to see which arrives first, humility or death. Either way, I will spare you a moment's compassion, which is what sets you and me apart, isn't it? A package arrived today, yes?'

Tanal blinked. *See how we all possess a bloodlust*. Then he nodded. 'Yes, Invigilator. A new puzzle for you.'

'Excellent. From whom?'

'Anonymous.'

'Most curious. Is that part of the mystery, or fear of ridicule when I solve it after a mere moment's thought? Well, how can you possibly answer that question? Where is it now?'

'It should have been delivered to your office, sir.'

'Good. Permit the man below to scream for the rest of the afternoon, then have him sent below again.'

Tanal bowed as Karos left the balcony. He waited for a hundred heartbeats, then he too departed.

A short time later he descended to the lowest level of the ancient dungeons, down spiralling stone steps to corridors and cells that had not seen regular use in centuries. The recent floods had inundated both this level and the one above it, although the waters had since drained, leaving behind thick silts and the stench of stagnant, filthy water. Carrying a lantern, Tanal Yathvanar made his way down a sloping channel until he came to what had once been the primary inquisition chamber. Arcane, rust-seized mechanisms squatted on the pavestoned floor, or were affixed to walls, with one bedframe-like cage suspended from the ceiling by thick chains.

Directly opposite the entrance was a wedge-shaped contraption, replete with manacles and chains that could be drawn tight via a wall-mounted ratchet to one side. The inclined bed faced onto the chamber, and shackled to it was the woman he had been instructed to release.

She was awake, turning her face away from the sudden light.

Tanal set the lantern down on a table cluttered with instruments of torture. 'Time for a feeding,' he said.

She said nothing.

*A well-respected academic. Look at her now.* 'All those lofty words of yours,' Tanal said. 'In the end, they prove less substantial than dust on the wind.'

Her voice was ragged, croaking. 'May you one day choke on that dust, little man.'

Tanal smiled. ' "Little". You seek to wound me. A pathetic effort.' He walked over to a chest against the wall to his right. It had contained vise-helms, but Tanal had removed the skull-crushers, filling the chest with flasks of water and dried foodstuffs. 'I shall need to bring down buckets with soap-water,' he said, drawing out the makings of her supper. 'Unavoidable as your defecation is, the smell and the stains are most unpleasant.'

'Oh, I offend you, do I?'

He glanced over at her and smiled. 'Janath Anar, a senior lecturer in the Academy of Imperial Learning. Alas, you appear to have learned nothing of imperial ways. Although, one might argue, that has changed since your arrival here.'

She studied him, a strangely heavy look to her bruised eyes. 'From the First Empire until this day, little man, there have been times of outright tyranny. That the present oppressors are Tiste Edur is scarely worth noting. After all, the true oppression comes from you. Letherii against Letherii. Furthermore—'

'Furthermore,' Tanal said, mocking her, 'the Patriotists are the Letherii gift of mercy against their own. Better us than the Edur. We do not make indiscriminate arrests; we do not punish out of ignorance; we are not random.'

'A gift? Do you truly believe that?' she asked, still studying him. 'The Edur don't give a damn, one way or the other. Their leader is unkillable, and that makes their mastery absolute.'

'A high-ranking Tiste Edur liaises with us almost daily—'

'To keep you in rein. You, Tanal Yathvanar, not your prisoners. You and that madman, Karos Invictad.' She cocked her head. 'Why is it, I wonder, that organizations such as yours are invariably run by pitiful human failures? By small-minded psychotics and perverts. All bullied as children,

of course. Or abused by twisted parents – I'm sure you have terrible tales to confess, of your miserable youth. And now the power is in your hands, and oh how the rest of us suffer.'

Tanal walked over with the food and the flask of water.

'For Errant's sake,' she said, 'loosen at least one of my arms, so I can feed myself.'

He came up beside her. 'No, I prefer it this way. Are you humiliated, being fed like a babe?'

'What do you want with me?' Janath asked, as he unstoppered the flask.

He set it to her cracked lips, watched her drink. 'I don't recall saying I wanted anything,' he replied.

She twisted her head away, coughing, water spilling onto her chest. 'I've confessed everything,' she said after a moment. 'You have all my notes, my treasonous lectures on personal responsibility and the necessity for compassion—'

'Yes, your moral relativism.'

'I refute any notion of relativism, little man – which you'd know had you bothered reading those notes. The structures of a culture do not circumvent nor excuse self-evident injustice or inequity. The status quo is not sacred, not an altar to paint in rivers of blood. Tradition and habit are not sound arguments—'

'White Crow, woman, you are most certainly a lecturer. I liked you better unconscious.'

'Best beat me senseless again,' she said.

'Alas, I cannot. After all, I am supposed to free you.'

Her eyes narrowed on his, then shied away again. 'Careless of me,' she muttered.

'In what way?' he asked.

'I was almost seduced. The lure of hope. If you are supposed to free me, you would never have brought me down here. No, I'm to be your private victim, and you my private nightmare. In the end, the chains upon you will be a match to mine.'

'The psychology of the human mind,' Tanal said, pushing some fat-soaked bread into her mouth. 'Your speciality. So, you can read my life as easily as you read a scroll. Is that supposed to frighten me?'

She chewed, then, with a struggle, swallowed. 'I wield a far deadlier weapon, little man.'

'And that would be?'

'I slip into your head. I see through your eyes. Swim the streams of your thought. I stand there, looking at the soiled creature chained to this rape-bed. And eventually, I begin to understand you. It's more intimate than making love, little man, because all your secrets vanish. And, in case you were wondering, yes, I am doing it even now. Listening to my own words as you listen, feeling the tightness gripping your chest, that odd chill beneath your skin despite the fresh sweat. The sudden fear, as you realize the extent of your vulnerability—'

He struck her. Hard enough to snap her head to one side. Blood gushed from her mouth. She coughed, spat, then spat again, her breath coming in ragged, liquid gasps. 'We can resume this meal later,' he said, struggling to keep his words toneless. 'I expect you'll do your share of screaming in the days and weeks to come, Janath, but I assure you, your cries will reach no-one.'

A peculiar hacking sound came from her.

After a moment, Tanal realized she was laughing.

'Impressive bravado,' he said, with sincerity. 'Eventually, I may in truth free you. For now, I remain undecided. I'm sure you understand.'

She nodded.

'You arrogant bitch,' he said.

She laughed again.

He backed away. 'Do not think I will leave the lantern,' he snarled.

Her laughter followed him out, cutting like broken glass.

The ornate carriage, trimmed in gleaming bloodwood, was motionless, drawn up to one side of the main thoroughfare of Drene, its tall wheels straddling the open sewer. The four bone-white horses stood listless in the unseasonal heat, heads hanging down over their collars. Directly ahead of them the street was framed in an arching open gate, and beyond it was the sprawling maze of the High Market, a vast concourse crowded with stalls, carts, livestock and throngs of people.

The flow of wealth, the cacophony of voices and the multitude of proffering or grasping hands seemed to culminate in a force, battering at Brohl Handar's senses even from where he sat, protected within the plush confines of the carriage. The heaving sounds from the market, the chaotic back and forth flow of people beneath the gate, and the crowds on the street itself, all made the Overseer think of religious fervour, as if he was witness to a frenzied version of a Tiste Edur funeral. In place of the women voicing their rhythmic grunts of constrained grief, drovers bullied braying beasts through the press. Instead of unblooded youths wading through blood-frothed surf pounding paddles against the waves, there was the clatter of cartwheels and the high, piping cries of hawkers. The woodsmoke of the pyres and offerings enwreathing an Edur village was, here, a thick, dusty river tainted with a thousand scents. Dung, horse piss, roasting meat, vegetables and fish, uncured myrid hides and tanned rodara skins; rotting wastes and the cloying smells of intoxicating drugs.

Here, among the Letherii, no precious offerings were thrown into the sea. Tusked seal ivory leaned against shelves like fang-rows from some wooden mechanisms of torture. In other stalls, that ivory reappeared, this time carved into a thousand shapes, many of them mimicking religious objects from the Edur, the Jheck and the Fent, or as playing pieces for a game. Polished amber was adornment, not the sacred tears of captured dusk, and bloodwood itself had been carved into bowls, cups and cooking utensils.

Or to trim an ostentatious carriage.

Through a slit in the shutters, the Overseer watched the surging to and fro on the street. An occasional Tiste Edur appeared in the crowds, a head taller than most Letherii, and Brohl thought he could read something of bemusement behind their haughty, remote expressions; and once, in the face of an overdressed, ring-speared Elder whom Brohl knew personally, he saw the glint of avarice in the Edur's eyes.

Change was rarely chosen, and its common arrival was slow, subtle. Granted, the Letherii had experienced the shock of defeated armies, a slain king, and a new ruling class, but even then such sudden reversals had proved not nearly as catastrophic as one might have expected. The skein that held Lether together was resilient and, Brohl now knew, far stronger than it appeared. What disturbed him the most, however, was the ease with which that skein entwined all who found themselves in its midst.

*Poison in that touch, yet not fatal, just intoxicating. Sweet, yet perhaps, ultimately, deadly. This is what comes of . . . comfort.* Yet, he could well see, the reward of comfort was not available to all; indeed, it seemed disturbingly rare. While those who possessed wealth clearly exulted in its display, that very ostentation underscored the fact that they were a distinct minority. But that imbalance was, he now understood, entirely necessary. Not everyone could be rich – the system would not permit such equity, for the power and privilege it offered was dependent on the very opposite. *Inequity, else how can power be assessed, how can the gifts of privilege be valued? For there to be rich, there must be poor, and more of the latter than the former.*

Simple rules, easily arrived at through simple observation. Brohl Handar was not a sophisticated man, a shortcoming he was reminded of every day since his arrival as Overseer of Drene. He had no particular experience with governing, and few of the skills in his possession were proving applicable to his new responsibilities.

The Factor, Letur Anict, was conducting an unofficial war against the tribes beyond the borderlands, using imperial troops to steal land and consolidate his new-found holdings. There was no real justification for this

bloodshed; the goal was personal wealth. As yet, however, Brohl Handar did not know what he was going to do about it, if indeed he was going to do anything. He had prepared a long report to the Emperor, providing well-documented details describing the situation here in Drene. That report remained in Brohl's possession, for he had begun to suspect that, should he send it off to Letheras, it would not reach the Emperor, or any of his Edur advisors. The Letherii Chancellor, Triban Gnol, appeared to be complicit and possibly even in league with Letur Anict – hinting at a vast web of power, hidden beneath the surface and seemingly thriving unaffected by Edur rule. At the moment, all Brohl Handar had were suspicions, hints of that insidious web of power. One link was certain, and that was with this Letherii association of wealthy families, the Liberty Consign. Possibly, this organization was at the very heart of the hidden power. But he could not be sure.

Brohl Handar, a minor noble among the Tiste Edur, and newly appointed Overseer to a small city in a remote corner of the empire, well knew that he could not challenge such a thing as the Liberty Consign. He was, indeed, beginning to believe that the Tiste Edur tribes, scattered as they had become across this vast land, were little more than flotsam riding the indifferent currents of a turgid, deep river.

*Yet, there is the Emperor.*

*Who is quite probably insane.*

He did not know to whom to turn; nor even if what he was witnessing was, in truth, as dangerous as it seemed.

Brohl was startled by a commotion near the gate and he leaned forward to set an eye against the slit between the shutters.

An arrest. People were quickly moving away from the scene as two nondescript Letherii, one to each side, pushed their victim face-first against one of the gate's uprights. There were no shouted accusations, no frightened denials. The silence shared by the Patriotist agents and their prisoner left the Overseer strangely shaken. As if the details did not matter to any of them.

One of the agents was searching for weapons, finding none, and then, as his fellow agent held the man against the ornate upright, he removed the leather hip-satchel from the man's belt and began rummaging through it. The prisoner's face was pressed sideways against the bas-relief carvings on the broad, squared column, and those carvings depicted some past glory of the Letherii Empire. Brohl Handar suspected the irony was lost on all concerned.

Sedition would be the charge. It was always the charge. But against what? Not the presence of the Tiste Edur – that would be pointless, after all, and certainly there had been virtually no attempts at reprisal, at least none that Brohl Handar had heard about. So . . . what, precisely? Against whom? The Indebted always existed, and some fled their debts, but most did not. There were sects formulated around political or social disquiet, many of them drawing membership from the disenfranchised remnants of subjugated tribes – the Fent, the Nerek, Tarthenal and others. But since the conquest, most of these sects had either dissolved or fled the empire. Sedition. A charge to silence debate. Somewhere, therefore, there must exist a list of the accepted beliefs, the host of convictions and faiths that composed the proper doctrine. Or was something more insidious at work?

There was a scratch at the carriage door, and a moment later it opened.

Brohl Handar studied the figure stepping onto the runner, the carriage tilting with his weight. 'By all means, Orbyn,' he said, 'enter.'

Muscle softened by years of inactivity, fleshy face, the jowls heavy and slack, Orbyn 'Truthfinder' seemed to sweat incessantly, regardless of ambient temperature, as if some internal pressure forced the toxins of his mind to the surface of his skin. The local head of the Patriotists was, to Brohl Handar's eye, the most despicable, malicious creature he had ever met.

'Your arrival is well timed,' the Tiste Edur said as Orbyn entered the carriage and settled down on the bench opposite, the acrid smell of his sweat wafting across. 'Although I was not aware that you personally oversee the daily activities of your agents.'

Orbyn's thin lips creased in a smile. 'We have stumbled on some information that might be of interest to you, Overseer.'

'Another one of your non-existent conspiracies?'

The smile widened momentarily, a flicker. 'If you are referring to the Bolkando Conspiracy, alas, that one belongs to the Liberty Consign. The information we have acquired concerns your people.'

*My people*. 'Very well.' Brohl Handar waited. Outside, the two agents were dragging their prisoner away, and around them the flow of humanity resumed, furtive in their avoidance.

'A party was sighted, west of Bluerose. Two Tiste Edur, one of them white-skinned. This latter one, I believe, has become known as the White Crow – a most disturbing title for us Letherii, by the way.' He blinked, the lids heavy. 'Accompanying them were three Letherii, two female and one an escaped slave with the ownership tattoos of the Hiroth tribe.'

Brohl forced himself to remain expressionless, although a tightness gripped his chest. *This is none of your business.* 'Do you have more details as to their precise location?'

'They were heading east, to the mountains. There are three passes, only two open this early in the season.'

Brohl Handar slowly nodded. 'The Emperor's K'risnan are also capable of determining their general whereabouts. Those passes are blocked.' He paused, then said, 'It is as Hannan Mosag predicted.'

Orbyn's dark eyes studied him from between folds of fat. 'I am reminded of Edur efficiency.'

*Yes*.

The man known as Truthfinder went on, 'The Patriotists have questions regarding this white-skinned Tiste Edur, this White Crow. From which tribe does he hail?'

'None. He is not Tiste Edur.'

'Ah. I am surprised. The description . . .'

Brohl Handar said nothing.

'Overseer, can we assist?'

'Unnecessary at this time,' Brohl replied.

'I am most curious as to why you have not already closed in on this party and effected a capture. My sources indicate that the Tiste Edur is none other than Fear Sengar, the Emperor's brother.'

'As I said, the passes are blocked.'

'Ah, then you are tightening the net even as we speak.'

Brohl Handar smiled. 'Orbyn, you said earlier the Bolkando Conspiracy is under the purview of the Liberty Consign. By that, are you truly telling me that the Patriotists are without interest in that matter?'

'Not at all. The Consign makes use of our network on a regular basis—' 'For which you are no doubt rewarded.'

'Of course.'

'I find myself—'

Orbyn raised a hand, head cocking. 'You will have to excuse me, Overseer. I hear alarms.' He rose with a grunt, pushing open the carriage door.

Bemused, Brohl said nothing, watching as the Letherii left. Once the door was closed he reached to a small compartment and withdrew a woven ball filled with scented grasses, then held it to his face. A tug on a cord stirred the driver to collect up the traces. The carriage lurched as it rolled forward. Brohl could hear the alarms now, a frantic cacophony. Leaning forward, he spoke into the voice-tube. 'Take us to those bells, driver.' He hesitated, then added, 'No hurry.'

The Drene Garrison commanded a full dozen stone buildings situated on a low hill north of the city centre. Armoury, stables, barracks and command headquarters were all heavily fortified, although the complex was not

walled. Drene had been a city-state once, centuries past, and after a protracted war with the Awl the beleaguered king had invited Letherii troops to effect victory against the nomads. Decades later, evidence had come out that the conflict itself had been the result of Letherii manipulations. In any case, the Letherii troops had never left; the king accepted the title of vizier and in a succession of tragic accidents he and his entire line were wiped out. But that was history, now, the kind that was met with indifference.

Four principal avenues extended out from the garrison's parade grounds, the one leading northward converging with the Gate Road that led to the city wall and the North Coast track – the least frequented of the three landward routes to and from the city.

In the shadows beneath the gabled balcony of a palatial estate just beyond the armoury, on the north avenue, a clear line of sight was available for the short, lithe figure standing in the cool gloom. A rough-woven hood hid the features, although had anyone bothered to pause in passing, squinting hard, they would have been startled to see the glint of crimson scales where the face should have been, and eyes hidden in black-rimmed slits. But there was something about the figure that encouraged inattention. Gazes slid past, rarely comprehending that, indeed, someone stood in those shadows.

He had positioned himself there just before dawn and it was now late afternoon. Eyes fixed on the garrison, the messengers entering and exiting the headquarters, the visitation of a half-dozen noble merchants, the purchasing of horses, scrap metal, saddles and other sundry materiel. He studied the skin hides on the round-shields of the lancers – flattened faces, the skin darkened to somewhere between purple and ochre, making the tattooing subtle and strangely beautiful.

Late afternoon, the shadows lengthening, and the figure made note of two Letherii men, passing across his field of vision for the second time. Their lack of attention seemed . . . conspicuous, and some instinct told the cowled figure that it was time to leave.

As soon as they had passed by, heading up the street, westward, the figure stepped out from the shadows, walked swiftly and silently after the two

men. He sensed their sudden, heightened awareness – and perhaps something like alarm. Moments before catching up to them, he turned right, into an alley leading north.

Fifteen paces in, he found a dark recess in which he could hide. He drew back his cloak and cinched it, freeing his arms and hands.

A dozen heartbeats passed before he heard their footfalls.

He watched them walk past, cautious, both with drawn knives. One whispered something to the other and they hesitated.

The figure allowed his right foot to scrape as he stepped forward.

They spun round.

The Awl'dan cadaran whip was a whisper as it snaked out, the leather – studded with coin-sized, dagger-sharp, overlapping half-moon blades – flickering out in a gleaming arc that licked both men across their throats. Blood sprayed.

He watched them crumple. The blood flowed freely, more from the man who had been on the left, spreading across the greasy cobbles. Stepping close to the other victim, he unsheathed a knife and plunged it point-first into his throat; then, with practised familiarity, he cut off the man's face, taking skin, muscle and hair. He repeated the ghastly task with the other man.

Two fewer agents of the Patriotists to contend with.

Of course, they worked in threes, one always at a distance, following the first two.

From the garrison, the first alarms sounded, a shrill collection of bells that trilled out through the dusty air above the buildings.

Folding up his grisly trophies and pushing them beneath a fold in the loose rodara wool shirt that covered his scaled hauberk, the figure set off along the alley, making for the north gate.

A squad of the city guard appeared at the far mouth, five armoured, helmed Letherii with shortswords and shields.

Upon seeing them, the figure sprinted forward, freeing the cadaran whip in his left hand, while in his right hand he shook free the rygtha crescent axe from the over-under strips of rawhide that had held it against his hip. A thick haft, as long as a grown man's thigh bone, to which each end was affixed a three-quarter-moon iron blade, their planes perpendicular to each other. Cadaran and rygtha: ancient weapons of the Awl'dan, their mastery virtually unknown among the tribes for at least a century.

The constabulary had, accordingly, never before faced such weapons.

At ten paces from the first three guardsmen, the whip lashed out, a blurred sideways figure-eight that spawned screams and gouts of blood that spilled almost black in the alley's gloom. Two of the Letherii reeled back.

The lithe, wiry figure closed on the last man in the front row. Right hand slid along the haft to run up against a flange beneath the left-side crescent blade, the haft slapping parallel to the underside of his forearm as he brought the weapon up – blocking a desperate slash from the guard's shortsword. Then, as the Awl threw his elbow forward, the right-side blade flashed out, cutting at the man's face, connecting just below the helm's rim, chopping through the nasal ridge and frontal bone before dipping into the soft matter of his brain. The tapered, sharp crescent blade slid back out with ease, as the Awl slipped past the falling guard, whip returning from an over-the-head gather to hiss out, wrapping round the neck of the fourth Letherii – who shrieked, dropping his sword as he scrabbled at the deadly blades – as the Awl dropped into a crouch, his right hand sliding the length of the rygtha haft to abut the flanged base of the right-blade, then slashing out. The fifth guard jerked his shield upward to block, but too late – the blade caught him across the eyes.

A tug on the whip decapitated the fourth guard.

The Awl released his hold on the cadaran's handle and, gripping the rygtha at both ends, stepped close to slam the haft into the last guard's throat, crushing the windpipe.

Collecting the whip, he moved on.

A street, the sound of lancers off to the right. The gate, fifty paces to the left, now knotted with guards – heads turning his way.

He raced straight for them.

Atri-Preda Bivatt took personal command of a troop of lancers. Twenty riders at her back, she led her horse at a canter, following the trail of a bloodbath.

The two Patriotist agents midway down the alley. Five city guardsmen at the far end.

Riding out onto the street, she angled her mount to the left, drawing her longsword as she neared the gate.

Bodies everywhere, twenty or more, and only two seemed to be still alive. Bivatt stared from beneath the rim of her helm, cold sweat prickling awake beneath her armour. Blood everywhere. On the cobbles, splashed high on the walls and the gate itself. Dismembered limbs. The stench of vacated bowels, spilled intestines. One of the survivors was screaming, head whipping back and forth. Both his hands had been sliced off.

Just beyond the gate, Bivatt saw as she reined in, four horses were down, their riders sprawled out on the road. Drifting dust indicated that the others from the first troop to arrive were riding in pursuit.

The other survivor stumbled up to her. He had taken a blow to the head, the helm dented on one side and blood flowing down that side of his face and neck. In his eyes as he stared up at her, a look of horror. He opened his mouth, but no words came forth.

Bivatt scanned the area once more, then turned to her Finadd. 'Take the troop through, go after them. Get your weapons out, damn you!' She glared back down at the guardsman. 'How many were there?'

He gaped.

More guardsmen were arriving. A cutter hurried to the screaming man who had lost his hands.

'Did you hear my question?' Bivatt hissed.

He nodded, then said. 'One. One man, Atri-Preda.'

*One? Ridiculous*. 'Describe him!'

'Scales – his face was scales. Red as blood!'

A rider from her troop returned from the road. 'The first troop of lancers are all dead, Atri-Preda,' he said, his tone high and pinched. 'Further down the road. All the horses but one – sir, should we follow?'

'Should you follow? You damned fool – of course you should follow! Stay on his trail!'

A voice spoke behind her. 'That description, Atri-Preda . . .'

She twisted round in her saddle.

Orbyn Truthfinder, sheathed in sweat, stood amidst the carnage, his small eyes fixed on her.

Bivatt bared her teeth in a half-snarl. 'Yes,' she snapped.

*Redmask. None other.* The commander of the Patriotists in Drene pursed his lips, glanced down to scan the corpses on all sides. 'It seems,' he said, 'his exile from the tribes is at an end.'

*Yes.*

*Errant save us.*

Brohl Handar stepped down from the carriage and surveyed the scene of battle. He could not imagine what sort of weapons the attackers had used, to achieve the sort of damage he saw before him. The Atri-Preda had taken charge, as more soldiery appeared, while Orbyn Truthfinder stood in the shade of the gate blockhouse entrance, silent and watching.

The Overseer approached Bivatt. 'Atri-Preda,' he said, 'I see none but your own dead here.'

She glared at him, yet it was a look containing more than simple anger. He saw fear in her eyes. 'The city was infiltrated,' she said, 'by an Awl

warrior.'

'This is the work of one man?'

'It is the least of his talents.'

'Ah, then you know who this man is.'

'Overseer, I am rather busy—'

'Tell me of him.'

Grimacing, she gestured him to one side of the gate. They both had to step carefully over corpses sprawled on the slick cobblestones. 'I think I have sent a troop of lancers out to their deaths, Overseer. My mood is not conducive to lengthy conversation.'

'Oblige me. If a war-party of Awl'dan warriors is at the very edge of this city, there must be an organized response – one,' he added, seeing her offended look, 'involving the Tiste Edur as well as your units.'

After a moment, she nodded. 'Redmask. The only name by which we know him. Even the Awl'dan have but legends of his origins—'

'And they are?'

'Letur Anict—'

Brohl Handar hissed in anger and glared across at Orbyn, who had moved within hearing range. 'Why is it that every disaster begins with that man's name?'

Bivatt resumed. 'There was skirmishing, years ago now, between a rich Awl tribe and the Factor. Simply, Letur Anict coveted the tribe's vast herds. He despatched agents who, one night, entered an Awl camp and succeeded in kidnapping a young woman – one of the clan leader's daughters. The Awl, you see, were in the habit of stealing Letherii children. In any case, that daughter had a brother.'

'Redmask.'

She nodded. 'A younger brother. Anyway, the Factor adopted the girl into his household, and before too long she was Indebted to him—'

'No doubt without even being aware of that. Yes, I understand. And so, in order to purchase that debt, and her own freedom, Letur demanded her father's herds.'

'Yes, more or less. And the clan leader agreed. Alas, even as the Factor's forces approached the Awl camp with their precious cargo, the girl plunged a knife into her own heart. Thereafter, things got rather confused. Letur Anict's soldiers attacked the Awl camp, killing everyone—'

'The Factor decided he would take the herds anyway.'

'Yes. It turned out, however, that there was one survivor. A few years later, as the skirmishes grew fiercer, the Factor's troops found themselves losing engagement after engagement. Ambushes were turned. And the name of Redmask was first heard – a new war chief. Now, what follows is even less precise than what I have described thus far. It seems there was a gathering of the clans, and Redmask spoke – argued, that is, with the Elders. He sought to unify the clans against the Letherii threat, but the Elders could not be convinced. In his rage, Redmask spoke unwise words. The Elders demanded he retract them. He refused, and so was exiled. It is said he travelled east, into the wildlands between here and Kolanse.'

'What is the significance of the mask?'

Bivatt shook her head. 'I don't know. There is a legend that he killed a dragon, in the time immediately following the slaughter of his family. No more than a child – which makes the tale unlikely.' She shrugged.

'And so he has returned,' Brohl Handar said, 'or some other Awl warrior has adopted the mask and so seeks to drive fear into your hearts.'

'No, it was him. He uses a bladed whip and a two-headed axe. The weapons themselves are virtually mythical.'

The Overseer frowned at her. 'Mythical?'

'Awl legends hold that their people once fought a war, far to the east, when the Awl dwelt in the wildlands. The cadaran and rygtha were weapons designed to deal with that enemy. I have no more details than what I have just given you, except that it appears that whatever that enemy was, it wasn't human.'

'Every tribe has tales of past wars, an age of heroes—'

'Overseer, the Awl'dan legends are not like that.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. First of all, the Awl lost that war. That is why they fled west.'

'Have there been no Letherii expeditions into the wildlands?'

'Not in decades, Overseer. After all, we are clashing with the various territories and kingdoms along that border. The last expedition was virtually wiped out, a single survivor driven mad by what she had seen. She spoke of something called the Hissing Night. The voice of death, apparently. In any case, her madness could not be healed and so she was put to death.'

Brohl Handar considered that for a time. An officer had arrived and was waiting to speak with the Atri-Preda. 'Thank you,' he said to Bivatt, then turned away.

'Overseer.'

He faced her again. 'Yes?'

'If Redmask succeeds this time . . . with the tribes, I mean, well, we shall indeed have need of the Tiste Edur.'

His brows rose. 'Of course, Atri-Preda.' *And maybe this way, I can reach the ear of the Emperor and Hannan Mosag. Damn this Letur Anict. What has he brought down upon us now?*

He rode the Letherii horse hard, leaving the north road and cutting east, across freshly tilled fields that had once been Awl'dan grazing land. His passage drew the attention of farmers, and from the last hamlet he skirted three stationed soldiers had saddled horses and set off in pursuit.

In a dip of the valley Redmask had just left, they met their deaths in a chorus of animal and human screams, piercing but short-lived.

A bluster of rhinazan spun in a raucous cloud over the Awl warrior's head, driven away from their favoured hosts by the violence, their wings beating like tiny drums and their long serrated tails hissing in the air as they tracked Redmask. He had long since grown used to their ubiquitous presence. Residents of the wildlands, the weasel-sized flying reptiles were far from home, unless their hosts – in the valley behind him and probably preparing another ambush – could be called home.

He slowed his horse, shifting in discomfort at the awkward Letherii saddle. No-one would reach him now, he knew, and there was no point in running this beast into the ground. The enemy had been confident in their city garrison, brazen with their trophies, and Redmask had learned much in the night and the day he had spent watching them. Bluerose lancers, properly stirruped and nimble on their mounts. Far more formidable than the foot soldiers of years before.

And thus far, since his return, he had seen of his own people only abandoned camps, drover tracks from smallish herds and disused tipi rings. It was as if his home had been decimated, and all the survivors had fled. And at the only scene of battle he had come upon, there had been naught but the corpses of foreigners.

The sun was low on the horizon behind him, dusk closing in, when he came upon the first burned Awl'dan encampment. A year old, maybe more. White bones jutting from the grasses, blackened stumps from the hut frames, a dusty smell of desolation. No-one had come to retrieve the fallen, to lift the butchered bodies onto lashed platforms, freeing the souls to dance with the carrion birds. The scene raised grim memories.

He rode on. As the darkness gathered, the rhinazan slowly drifted away, and Redmask could hear the double thump, one set to either side, as his two companions, their bloody work done, moved up into flanking positions, barely visible in the gloom.

The rhinazan settled onto the horizontal, scaled backs, to lick splashed gore and pluck ticks, to lift their heads in snapping motions, inhaling sharply to draw in the biting insects that buzzed too close.

Redmask allowed his eyes to half close – he had been awake for most of two days. With Sag'Churok, the hulking male, gliding over the ground to his right; and Gunth Mach, the young drone that was even now growing into a female, on his left, he could not be more secure.

Like the rhinazan, the two K'Chain Che'Malle seemed content, even in this strange land and so far away from their kin.

Content to follow Redmask, to protect him, to kill Letherii.

And he had no idea why.

Silchas Ruin's eyes were reptilian in the lantern light, no more appropriate a sight possible given the chamber they now found themselves in, as far as Seren Pedac was concerned. The stone walls, curving upward to a dome, were carved in overlapping scales. The unbroken pattern left her feeling disoriented, slightly nauseous. She settled onto the floor, blinked the grit from her eyes.

It must be near morning, she judged. They had been walking tunnels, ascending inclines and spiralling ramps for most of an entire night. The air was stale, despite the steady downward flow of currents, as if it was gathering ghosts with every chamber and down every corridor it traversed.

She glanced away from her regard of Silchas Ruin, irritated at her own fascination with the savage, unearthly warrior, the way he could hold himself so perfectly still, even the rise and fall of his chest barely discernible. Buried for millennia, yet he did indeed live. Blood flowed in his veins, thoughts rose grimed with the dust of disuse. When he spoke, she could hear the weight of barrowstones. It was unimaginable to her how a person could so suffer without going mad.

Then again, perhaps he was mad, something hidden deep within him, either constrained by exigencies, or simply awaiting release. As a killer – for that surely was what he was – he was both thorough and dispassionate.

As if mortal lives could be reduced in meaning, reduced to surgical judgement: obstacle or ally. Nothing else mattered.

She understood the comfort of seeing the world in that manner. The ease of its simplicity was inviting. But for her, impossible. One could not will oneself blind to the complexities of the world. Yet, for Silchas Ruin, such seeming complexities were without relevance. He had found a kind of certainty, and it was unassailable.

Alas, Fear Sengar was not prepared to accept the hopelessness of his constant assaults upon Silchas Ruin. The Tiste Edur stood near the triangular portal they would soon pass through, as if impatient with this rest stop. 'You think,' he now said to Silchas Ruin, 'that I know virtually nothing of that ancient war, the invasion of this realm.'

The albino Tiste Andii's eyes shifted, fixed on Fear Sengar, but Silchas Ruin made no reply.

'The women remembered,' Fear said. 'They passed the tales to their daughters. Generation after generation. Yes, I know that Scabandari drove a knife into your back, there on that hill overlooking the field of battle. Yet, was this the first betrayal?'

If he was expecting a reaction, he was disappointed.

Udinaas loosed a low laugh from where he sat with his back to the scaled wall. 'You two are so pointless,' he said. 'Who betrayed whom. What does it matter? It's not as if we're relying on trust to keep us together. Tell me, Fear Sengar – once-master of mine – does your brother have any idea of who Ruin is? Where he came from? I would suggest not. Else he would have come after us personally, with ten thousand warriors at his back. Instead, they toy with us. Aren't you even curious why?'

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats, then Kettle giggled, drawing all eyes to her. Her blink was owlish. 'They want us to find what we're looking for first, of course.'

'Then why block our attempts to travel inland?' Seren demanded.

'Because they know it's the wrong direction.'

'How could they know that?'

Kettle's small, dust-stained hands fluttered like bats in the gloom. 'The Crippled God told them, that's how. The Crippled God said it's not yet time to travel east. He's not ready for open war, yet. He doesn't want us to go into the wildlands, where all the secrets are waiting.'

Seren Pedac stared at the child. 'Who in Errant's name is the Crippled God?'

'The one who gave Rhulad his sword, Acquitor. The true power behind the Tiste Edur.' Kettle threw up her hands. 'Scabandari's dead. The bargain was Hannan Mosag's, and the coin was Rhulad Sengar.'

Fear stood with bared teeth, staring at Kettle with something like terror in his eyes. 'How do you know this?' he demanded.

'The dead told me. They told me lots of things. So did the ones under the trees, the trapped ones. And they said something else too. They said the vast wheel is about to turn, one last time, before it closes. It closes, because it has to, because that's how he made it. To tell him all he needs to know. To tell him the truth.'

'Tell who?' Seren asked, scowling in confusion.

'Him, the one who's coming. You'll see.' She ran over to where Fear stood, took him by one hand and started tugging. 'We need to hurry, or they'll get us. And if they get us, Silchas Ruin will have to kill everyone.'

*I could strangle that child.* But she pushed herself to her feet once more.

Udinaas was laughing.

She was inclined to strangle him as well.

'Silchas,' she said as she moved close, 'do you have any idea what Kettle was talking about?'

'No, Acquitor. But,' he added, 'I intend to keep listening.'

# CHAPTER THREE

We came upon the fiend on the eastern slope of the Radagar Spine. It was lying in a shallow gorge formed by flash flooding, and the stench pervading the hot air told us of rotting flesh, and indeed upon examination, conducted with utmost caution on this, the very day following the ambush on our camp by unknown attackers, we discovered that the fiend was, while still alive, mortally wounded. How to describe such a demonic entity? When upright, it would have balanced on two hugely muscled hind legs, reminiscent of that of a shaba, the flightless bird found on the isles of the Draconean Archipelago, yet in comparison much larger here. The hip level of the fiend, when standing, would have been at a man's eye level. Long-tailed, the weight of the fiend's torso evenly balanced by its hips, thrusting the long neck and head far forward, the spine made horizontal. Two long forelimbs, thickly bound in muscle and hardened scales providing natural armour, ended, not in grasping talons or hands, but enormous swords, iron-bladed, that seemed fused, metal to bone, with the wrists. The head was snouted, like that of a crocodile, such as those found in the mud of the southern shoreline of the Bluerose Sea, yet, again, here much larger. Desiccation had peeled the lips back to reveal jagged rows of fangs, each one dagger-long. The eyes, clouded with approaching death, were nonetheless uncanny and alien to our senses.

The Atri-Preda, bold as ever, strode forward to deliver the fiend from its suffering, with a sword thrust into the soft tissue of its throat. With this fatal wound, the fiend loosed a death cry that struck us with pain, for the sound it voiced was beyond our range of hearing, yet it burst in our skulls with such ferocity that blood was driven from our nostrils, eyes and ears.

> One other detail is worth noting, before I expound on the extent of said injuries. The wounds visible upon the fiend were most curious. Elongated, curving slashes, perhaps from some form of tentacle, but a tentacle bearing sharp teeth, whilst other wounds were shorter but deeper in nature, invariably delivered to a region vital to locomotion or other similar dispensation of limbs, severing tendons and so forth . . .
>
> Factor Breneda Anict, *Expedition into the Wildlands*
> Official Annals of Pufanan Ibyris

He was not a man in bed. Oh, his parts functioned well enough, but in every other way he was a child, this Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. But worst of all, Nisall decided, was what happened afterwards, as he fell into that half-sleep, half-something else, limbs spasming, endless words tumbling from him in a litany of pleading, punctuated by despairing sobs that scraped the scented air of the chamber. And before long, after she'd escaped the bed itself, drawing a robe about her and taking position near the painted scene in the false window, five paces distant, she would watch him crawl down onto the floor and make his way as if crippled from some spinal injury, the ever-present sword trailing in one hand, across the room to the corner, where he would spend the rest of the night, curled up, locked in some eternal nightmare.

A thousand deaths, lived through night upon night. A thousand.

An exaggeration, of course. A few hundred at most.

Emperor Rhulad's torment was not the product of a fevered imagination, nor born of a host of anxieties. What haunted him were the truths of his past. She was able to identify some of his mutterings, in particular the one that dominated his nightmares, for she had been there. In the throne room, witness to Rhulad's non-death, weeping there on the floor all slick with his spilled blood, with a corpse on his throne and Rhulad's own slayer lying half upright against the dais – stolen away by poison.

Hannan Mosag's pathetic slither towards that throne had been halted by the demon that had appeared to collect the body of Brys Beddict, and the

almost indifferent sword thrust that killed Rhulad as the apparition made its way out.

The Emperor's awakening shriek had turned her heart into a frozen lump, a cry so brutally raw that she felt its fire in her own throat.

But it was what followed, a short time after his return, that stalked Rhulad with a thousand dripping blades. To die, only to return, is to never escape. Never escape . . . *anything*.

Wounds closing, he had lifted himself up, onto his hands and knees, still gripping the cursed sword, the weapon that would not let go. Weeping, drawing in ragged breaths, he crawled towards the throne, sagging down once more when he reached the dais.

Nisall had stepped out from where she had hidden moments earlier. Her mind was numb – the suicide of her king – her lover – and the Eunuch, Nifadas – the shocks, one upon another in this terrible throne room, the deaths, tumbling like crowded gravestones in a flooded field. Triban Gnol, ever the pragmatist, knelt before the new Emperor, pledging his service with the ease of an eel sliding under a new rock. The First Consort had been witness, as well, but she could not see Turudal Brizad now, as Rhulad, blood-wet coins gleaming, twisted round on the step and bared his teeth at Hannan Mosag.

'*Not yours*,' he said in a rasp.

'Rhulad—'

'Emperor! And you, Hannan Mosag, are my *Ceda*. Warlock King no longer. My Ceda, yes.'

'Your wife—'

'Dead. Yes.' Rhulad lifted himself onto the dais, then rose, staring now at the dead Letherii king, Ezgara Diskanar. Then he reached out with his unburdened hand, grasped the front of the king's brocaded tunic, and dragged the corpse from the throne, letting it fall to one side, head crunching on the tiled floor. A shiver seemed to rack through Rhulad. Then he sat on the throne and looked out, eyes settling once more on Hannan

Mosag. 'Ceda,' he said, 'in this, our chamber, you will ever approach us on your belly, as you do now.'

From the shadows at the far end of the throne room there came a phlegmatic cackle.

Rhulad flinched, then said, 'Now you will leave us, Ceda. And take that hag Janall and her son with you.'

'Emperor, please, you must understand—'

'*Get out!*'

The shriek jarred Nisall, and she hesitated, fighting the urge to flee, to get away from this place. From the court, from the city, from everything.

Then his free hand snapped out and without turning he said to her, 'Not you, whore. You stay.'

*Whore*. 'That term is inappropriate,' she said, then stiffened in fear, surprised by her own temerity.

He fixed feverish eyes on her. Then, incongruously, he waved dismissively and spoke with sudden weariness. 'Of course. We apologize. Imperial Concubine . . .' His glittering face twisted in a half-smile. 'Your king should have taken you as well. He was being selfish, or perhaps his love for you was so deep that he could not bear inviting you into death.'

She said nothing, for, in truth, she had no answer to give him.

'Ah, we see the doubt in your eyes. Concubine, you have our sympathy. Know that we will not use you cruelly.' He fell silent then, as he watched Hannan Mosag drag himself back across the threshold of the chamber's grand entranceway. A half-dozen more Tiste Edur had appeared, tremulous in their furtive motions, their uncertainty at what they were witnessing. A hissed command from Hannan Mosag sent two into the room, each one drawing up the burlap over the mangled forms of Janall and Quillas, her son. The sound as they dragged the two flesh-filled sacks from the chamber was, to Nisall's ears, more grisly than anything else she had yet heard on this fell day.

'At the same time,' the Emperor went on after a moment, 'the title and its attendant privileges . . . remain, should you so desire.'

She blinked, feeling as if she was standing on shifting sand. 'You free me to choose, Emperor?'

A nod, the bleary, red-shot eyes still fixed on the chamber's entranceway. 'Udinaas,' he whispered. 'Betrayer. You . . . you were not free to choose. Slave – my slave – I should never have trusted the darkness, never . . .' He flinched once more on the throne, eyes suddenly glittering. 'He comes.'

She had no idea whom he meant, but the raw emotion in his voice frightened her anew. What more could come on this terrible day?

Voices outside, one of them sounding bitter, then diffident.

She watched as a Tiste Edur warrior strode into the throne room. Rhulad's brother. One of them. The one who had left Rhulad lying on the tiles. Young, handsome in that way of the Edur – both alien and perfect. She tried to recall if she had heard his name—

'Trull,' said the Emperor in a rasp. 'Where is he? Where is Fear?'

'He has . . . left.'

'Left? Left us?'

'Us. Yes, Rhulad – or do you insist I call you Emperor?'

Expressions twisted across Rhulad's coin-studded face, one after another, then he grimaced and said, 'You left me, too, brother. Left me bleeding . . . on the floor. Do you think yourself different from Udinaas? Less a betrayer than my Letherii slave?'

'Rhulad, would that you were my brother of old—'

'The one you sneered down upon?'

'If it seemed I did that, then I apologize.'

'Yes, you see the need for that now, don't you?'

Trull Sengar stepped forward. 'It's the sword, Rhulad. It is cursed – please, throw it away. Destroy it. You've won the throne now, you don't need it any more—'

'You are wrong.' He bared his teeth, as if sickened by self-hatred. 'Without it I am just Rhulad, youngest son of Tomad. Without the sword, brother, I am nothing.'

Trull cocked his head. 'You have led us to conquest. I will stand beside you. So will Binadas, and our father. You have won that throne, Rhulad – you need not fear Hannan Mosag—'

'That miserable worm? You think me frightened of him?' The sword-tip made a snapping sound as its point jumped free of the tiles. Rhulad aimed the weapon at Trull's chest. 'I am the *Emperor*!'

'No, you're not,' Trull replied. 'Your sword is Emperor – your sword and the power behind it.'

'Liar!' Rhulad shrieked.

Nisall saw Trull flinch back, then steady himself. 'Prove it.'

The Emperor's eyes widened.

'Shatter the sword – Sister's blessing, just let it fall from your hand. Even that, Rhulad. Just that. Let it fall!'

'No! I know what you want, brother! You will take it – I see you tensed, ready to dive for it – I see the truth!' The weapon was shuddering between them, as if eager for blood, anyone's blood.

Trull shook his head. 'I want it shattered, Rhulad.'

'You cannot stand at my side,' the Emperor hissed. 'Too close – there is betrayal in your eyes – you left me! Crippled on the floor!' He raised his voice. 'Where are my warriors? Into the chamber! Your Emperor commands it!'

A half-dozen Edur warriors suddenly appeared, weapons out.

'Trull,' Rhulad whispered. 'I see you have no sword. Now it is for you to drop your favoured weapon, your spear. And your knives. What? Do you fear I will slay you? Show me the trust you claim in yourself. Guide me with your honour, *brother*.'

She did not know it then; she did not understand enough of the Edur way of life, but she saw something in Trull's face, a kind of surrender, but a surrender that was far more complicated, fraught, than simply disarming himself there before his brother. Levels of resignation, settling one upon another, the descent of impossible burdens – and the knowledge shared between the two brothers, of what such a surrender signified. She did not realize at the time what Trull's answer would mean, the way it was done, not in his own name, not for himself, but for Fear. Fear Sengar, more than anyone else. She did not realize, then, the immensity of his sacrifice, as he unslung his spear and let it clatter to the tiles; as he removed his knife belt and threw it to one side.

There should have been triumph in Rhulad's tortured eyes, then, but there wasn't. Instead, a kind of confusion clouded his gaze, made him shy away, as if seeking help. His attention found and focused upon the six warriors, and he gestured with the sword and said in a broken voice, 'Trull Sengar is to be Shorn. He will cease to exist, for ourself, for all Edur. Take him. Bind him. Take him away.'

Neither had she realized what that judgement, that decision, had cost Rhulad himself.

Free to choose, she had chosen to remain, for reasons she could not elucidate even in her own mind. Was there pity? Perhaps. Ambition, without question – for she had sensed, in that predatory manner demanded of life in the court, that there was a way through to him, a way to replace – without all the attendant history – those who were no longer at Rhulad's side. Not one of his warrior sycophants – they were worthless, ultimately, and she knew that Rhulad was well aware of that truth. In the end, she could see, he had no-one. Not his brother, Binadas, who, like Trull, proved too close and thus too dangerous for the Emperor to keep around – and so he had sent him away, seeking champions and scattered kin of the Edur tribes.

As for his father, Tomad, again the suborning role proved far too awkward to accommodate. Of the surviving K'risnan of Hannan Mosag, fully half had been sent to accompany Tomad and Binadas, so as to keep the new Ceda weak.

And all the while, as these decisions were made, as the Shorning was conducted, in secrecy, away from Letherii eyes, and as Nisall manoeuvred herself into the Emperor's bed, the Chancellor, Triban Gnol, had watched on, with the hooded eyes of a raptor.

The consort, Turudal Brizad, had vanished, although Nisall had heard rumours among the court servants that he had not gone far; that he haunted the lesser travelled corridors and subterranean mysteries of the old palace, ghostly and rarely more than half seen. She was undecided on the veracity of such claims; even so, if he were indeed hiding still in the palace, she realized that such a thing would not surprise her in the least. It did not matter – Rhulad had no wife, after all.

The Emperor's lover, a role she was accustomed to, although it did not seem that way. Rhulad was so young, so different from Ezgara Diskanar. His spiritual wounds were too deep to be healed by her touch, and so, even as she found herself in a position of eminence, of power – close as she was to the throne – she felt helpless. And profoundly alone.

She stood, watching the Emperor of Lether writhing as he curled up ever tighter in the corner of the room. Among the whimpers, groans and gasps, he spat out fragments of his conversation with Trull, his forsaken brother. And again and again, in hoarse whispers, Rhulad begged forgiveness.

Yet a new day awaited them, she reminded herself. And she would see this broken man gather himself, collect the pieces and then take his place seated on the imperial throne, looking out with red-rimmed eyes, his fragmented armour of coins gleaming dull in the light of the traditional torches lining the chamber's walls; and where those coins were missing, there was naught but scarred tissue, crimson-ringed weals of malformed flesh. And then, this ghastly apparition would, in the course of that day, proceed to astonish her.

Eschewing the old protocols of imperial rule, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths would sit through a presentation of petitions, an ever-growing number of citizens of the empire, poor and rich alike, who had come to accept the Imperial Invitation, feeding their courage to come face to face with their foreign ruler. For bell after bell, Rhulad would mete out justice as best he could. His struggles to understand the lives of the Letherii had touched her in unexpected ways – there was, she had come to believe, a decent soul beneath all that accursed trauma. And it was then that Nisall found herself most needed, although more often of late it was the Chancellor who dominated the advising, and she had come to realize that Triban Gnol had begun to view her as a rival. He was the principal organizer of the petitions, the filter that kept the numbers manageable, and his office had burgeoned accordingly. That his expanded staff also served as a vast and invasive web of spies in the palace was of course a given.

Thus, Nisall watched her Emperor, who had ascended the throne wading through blood, strive for benign rule, seeking a sensitivity too honest and awkward to be other than genuine. And it was breaking her heart.

For power had no interest in integrity. Even Ezgara Diskanar, so full of promise in his early years, had come to raise a wall between himself and the empire's citizens in the last decade of his rule. Integrity was too vulnerable to abuse by others, and Ezgara had suffered that betrayal again and again, and, perhaps most painfully of all, from his own wife, Janall, and then their son.

Too easy to dismiss the burden of such wounds, the depth of such scars.

And Rhulad, this youngest son of an Edur noble family, had been a victim of betrayal, of what must have been true friendship – with the slave, Udinaas – and in the threads of shared blood, from his very own brothers.

But each day, he overcame the torments of the night just gone. Nisall wondered, however, how much longer that could last. She alone was witness to his inner triumph, to that extraordinary war he waged with himself every morning. The Chancellor, for all his spies, knew nothing of it – she was certain of that. And that made him dangerous in his ignorance.

She needed to speak to Triban Gnol. She needed to mend this bridge. *But I will not be his spy.*

A most narrow bridge, then, one to be trod with caution.

Rhulad stirred in the gloom.

And then he whispered, 'I know what you want, brother . . .

'So guide me . . . guide me with your honour . . .'

*Ah, Trull Sengar, wherever your spirit now lurks, does it please you? Does this please you, to know that your Shorning failed?*

*So that you have now returned.*

*To so haunt Rhulad.*

'Guide me,' Rhulad croaked.

The sword scraped on the floor, rippling over mosaic stones like cold laughter.

'It is not possible, I'm afraid.'

Bruthen Trana studied the Letherii standing before him for a long moment and said nothing.

The Chancellor's gaze flicked away, as if distracted, and seemed moments from dismissing the Edur warrior outright; then, perhaps realizing that might be unwise, he cleared his throat and spoke in a tone of sympathy. 'The Emperor insists on these petitions, as you are aware, and they consume his every waking moment. They are, if you forgive me, his obsession.' His brows lifted a fraction. 'How can a true subject question their Emperor's love of justice? The citizens have come to adore him. They have come to see him for the honourable ruler he is in truth. That transition has taken some time, I admit, and involved immense effort on our part.'

'I wish to speak to the Emperor,' Bruthen said, his tone matching precisely the previous time he had spoken those words.

Triban Gnol sighed. 'Presumably you wish to make your report regarding Invigilator Karos Invictad and his Patriotists in person. I assure you, I do forward said reports.' He frowned at the Tiste Edur, then nodded and said, 'Very well. I will convey your wishes to his highness, Bruthen Trana.'

'If need be, place me among the petitioners.'

'That will not be necessary.'

The Tiste Edur gazed at the Chancellor for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he turned about and left the office. In the larger room beyond waited a crowd of Letherii. A score of faces turned to regard Bruthen as he threaded his way through – faces nervous, struggling with fear – while others studied the Tiste Edur with eyes that gave away nothing: the Chancellor's agents, the ones who, Bruthen suspected, went out each morning to round up the day's petitioners, then coached them in what to say to their Emperor.

Ignoring the Letherii as they parted to let him pass, he made his way out into the corridor, then onward through the maze of chambers, hallways and passages that composed the palace. He saw very few other Tiste Edur, barring one of Hannan Mosag's K'risnan, bent-backed and walking with one shoulder scraping against a wall, dark eyes flickering an acknowledgement as he limped along.

Bruthen Trana made his way into the wing of the palace closest to the river, and here the air was clammy, the corridors mostly empty. While the flooding that had occurred during the early stages of construction had been rectified, via an ingenious system of subsurface pylons, it seemed nothing could dispel the damp. Holes had been knocked in outer walls to create a flow of air, to little effect apart from filling the musty gloom with the scent of river mud and decaying plants.

Bruthen walked through one such hole, emerging out onto a mostly broken-up cobble path, with felled trees rotting amidst high grasses off to his left and the foundations of a small building to his right. Abandonment lingered in the still air like suspended pollen, and Bruthen was alone as he ascended the path's uneven slope to arrive at the edge of a cleared area, at the other end of which rose the ancient tower of the Azath, with the lesser

structures of the Jaghut to either side. In this clearing there were grave markers, set out in no discernible order. Half-buried urns, wax-sealed at the mouth, from which emerged weapons. Swords, broken spears, axes, maces – trophies of failure, a stunted forest of iron.

The Fallen Champions, the residents of a most prestigious cemetery. All had killed Rhulad at least once, some more than once – the greatest of these, an almost fullblood Tarthenal, had slain the Emperor seven times, and Bruthen could remember, with absolute clarity, the look of growing rage and terror in that Tarthenal's bestial face each time his fallen opponent arose, renewed, stronger and deadlier than he had been only moments earlier.

He entered the bizarre necropolis, eyes drifting across the various weapons, once so lovingly cared for – many of them bearing names – but now sheathed in rust. At the far end, slightly separated from all the others, stood an empty urn. Months earlier, out of curiosity, he had reached down into it, and found a silver cup. The cup that had contained the poison that killed three Letherii in the throne room – that had killed Brys Beddict.

No ashes. Even his sword had disappeared.

Bruthen Trana suspected that if this man were to return, now, he would face Rhulad again, and do what he did before. No, it was more than suspicion. A certainty.

Unseen by Rhulad, as the new Emperor lay there, cut to shreds on the floor, Bruthen had edged into the chamber to see for himself. And in that moment's fearful glance, he had discerned the appalling precision of that butchery. Brys Beddict had been perfunctory. Like a scholar dissecting a weak argument, an effort on his part no greater than tying on his moccasins.

Would that he had seen the duel itself, that he had witnessed the artistry of this tragically slain Letherii swordsman.

He stood, looking down at the dusty, web-covered urn.

And prayed for Brys Beddict's return.

A pattern was taking shape, incrementally, inexorably. Yet the Errant, once known as Turudal Brizad, Consort to Queen Janall, could not discern its meaning. The sensation, of unease, of dread, was new to him. Indeed, he considered, one could not imagine a more awkward state of mind for a god, here in the heart of his realm.

Oh, he had known times of violence; he had walked the ashes of dead empires, but his own sense of destiny was, even then, ever untarnished, inviolate and absolute. And, to make matters worse, patterns were his personal obsession, held to with a belief in his mastery of that arcane language, a mastery beyond challenge.

*Then who is it who plays with me now?*

He stood in the gloom, listening to the trickle of water seeping down some unseen wall, and stared down at the Cedance, the stone tiles of the Holds, the puzzle floor that was the very foundation of his realm. The Cedance. *My tiles. Mine. I am the Errant. This is my game.*

While before him the pattern ground on, the rumbling of stones too low and deep to hear, yet their resonance grated in his bones. *Disparate pieces, coming together. A function hidden, until the last moment – when all is too late, when the closure denies every path of escape.*

*Do you expect me to do nothing? I am not just one more of your victims. I am the Errant. By my hand, every fate is turned. All that seems random is by my design. This is an immutable truth. It has ever been. It shall ever be.*

Still, the taste of fear was on his tongue, as if he'd been sucking on dirtied coins day after day, running the wealth of an empire through his mouth. *But is that bitter flow inward or out?*

The grinding whisper of motion, all resolution of the images carved into the tiles . . . *lost*. Not a single Hold would reveal itself.

The Cedance had been this way since the day Ezgara Diskanar died. The Errant would be a fool to disregard linkage, but that path of reason had yet to lead him anywhere. Perhaps it was not Ezgara's death that mattered, but the Ceda's. *He never liked me much. And I stood and watched, as the Tiste*

*Edur edged to one side, as he flung his spear, transfixing Kuru Qan, killing the greatest Ceda since the First Empire. My game, I'd thought at the time. But now, I wonder . . .*

Maybe it was Kuru Qan's. *And, somehow, it still plays out. I did not warn him of that imminent danger, did I? Before his last breath rattled, he would have comprehended that . . . omission.*

*Has this damned mortal cursed me? Me, a god!*

Such a curse should be vulnerable. Not even Kuru Qan was capable of fashioning something that could not be dismantled by the Errant. He need only understand its structure, all that pinned it in place, the hidden spikes guiding these tiles.

*What comes? The empire is reborn, reinvigorated, revealing the veracity of the ancient prophecy. All is as I foresaw.*

His study of the blurred pavestones below the walkway became a glare. He hissed in frustration, and watched his breath plume away in the chill.

*An unknown transformation, in which I see naught but the ice of my own exasperation. Thus, I see, but am blind, blind to it all.*

The cold, too, was a new phenomenon. The heat of power had bled away from this place. Nothing was as it should be.

Perhaps, at some point, he would have to admit defeat. *And then I will have to pay a visit to a little, crabby old man. Working as a servant to a worthless fool. Humble, I will come in search of answers. I let Tehol live, didn't I? That must count for something.*

*Mael, I know you interfered last time. With unconscionable disregard for the rules. My rules. But I have forgiven you, and that, too, must count for something.*

Humility tasted even worse than fear. He was not yet ready for that.

He would take command of the Cedance. But to usurp the pattern, he would first have to find its maker. Kuru Qan? He was unconvinced.

*There are disturbances in the pantheons, new and old. Chaos, the stink of violence. Yes, this is a god's meddling. Perhaps Mael himself is to blame – no, it feels wrong. More likely, he knows nothing, remains blissfully ignorant. Will it serve me to make him aware that something is awry?*

An empire reborn. True, the Tiste Edur had their secrets, or at least they believed such truths were well hidden. They were not. An alien god had usurped them, and had made of a young Edur warrior an avatar, a champion, suitably flawed in grisly homage to the god's own pathetic dysfunctions. Power from pain, glory from degradation, themes in apposition – an empire reborn offered the promise of vigour, of expansion and longevity, none of which was, he had to admit, truly assured. *And such are promises.*

The god shivered suddenly in the bitter cold air of this vast, subterranean chamber. Shivered, on this walkway above a swirling unknown.

The pattern was taking shape.

And when it did, it would be too late.

'It's too late.'

'But there must be something we can do.'

'I'm afraid not. It's dying, Master, and unless we take advantage of its demise right now, someone else will.'

The capabara fish had used its tentacles to crawl up the canal wall, pulling itself over the edge onto the walkway, where it flattened out, strangely spreadeagled, to lie, mouth gaping, gills gasping, watching the morning get cloudy as it expired. The beast was as long as a man is tall, as fat as a mutton merchant from the Inner Isles, and, to Tehol's astonishment, even uglier. 'Yet my heart breaks.'

Bugg scratched his mostly hairless pate, then sighed. 'It's the unusually cold water,' he said. 'These like their mud warm.'

'Cold water? Can't you do something about that?'

'Bugg's Hydrogation.'

'You're branching out?'

'No, I was just trying on the title.'

'How do you hydrogate?'

'I have no idea. Well, I have, but it's not quite a legitimate craft.'

'Meaning it belongs in the realm of the gods.'

'Mostly. Although,' he said, brightening, 'with the recent spate of flooding, and given my past experience in engineering dry foundations, I begin to see some possibilities.'

'Can you soak investors?'

Bugg grimaced. 'Always seeing the destructive side, aren't you, Master?'

'It's my opportunistic nature. Most people,' he added, 'would view that as a virtue. Now, are you truly telling me you can't save this poor fish?'

'Master, it's already dead.'

'Is it? Oh. Well, I guess we now have supper.'

'More like fifteen suppers.'

'In any case, I have an appointment, so I will see you and the fish at home.'

'Why, thank you, Master.'

'Didn't I tell you this morning walk would prove beneficial?'

'Not for the capabara, alas.'

'Granted. Oh, by the way, I need you to make me a list.'

'Of what?'

'Ah, I will have to tell you that later. As I said, I am late for an appointment. It just occurred to me: is this fish too big for you to carry by yourself?'

'Well,' Bugg said, eyeing the carcass, 'it's small as far as capabara go – remember the one that tried to mate with a galley?'

'The betting on that outcome overwhelmed the Drownings. I lost everything I had that day.'

'Everything?'

'Three copper docks, yes.'

'What outcome did you anticipate?'

'Why, small rowboats that could row themselves with big flippery paddles.'

'You're late for your appointment, Master.'

'Wait! Don't look! I need to do something unseemly right now.'

'Oh, Master, really.'

Spies stood on street corners. Small squads of grey rain-caped Patriotists moved through the throngs that parted to give them wide berth as they swaggered with gloved hands resting on their belted truncheons, and on their faces the bludgeon arrogance of thugs. Tehol Beddict, wearing his blanket like a sarong, walked with the benign grace of an ascetic from some obscure but harmless cult. Or at least he hoped so. To venture onto the streets of Letheras these days involved a certain measure of risk that had not existed in King Ezgara Diskanar's days of pleasant neglect. While on the one hand this lent an air of intrigue and danger to every journey – including shopping for over-ripe root crops – there were also the taut nerves that one could not quell, no matter how many mouldy turnips one happened to be carrying.

Compounding matters, in this instance, was the fact that he was indeed intent on subversion. One of the first victims in this new regime had been the Rat Catchers' Guild. Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists, had acted on his first day of officialdom, despatching fully a hundred agents to Scale House, the modest Guild headquarters, whereupon they effected arrests on scores of Rat Catchers, all of whom, it later turned out, were

illusions – a detail unadvertised, of course, lest the dread Patriotists announce their arrival to cries of ridicule. Which would not do.

*After all, tyranny has no sense of humour. Too thin-skinned, too thoroughly full of its own self-importance. Accordingly, it presents an almost overwhelming temptation – how can I not be excused the occasional mockery?* Alas, the Patriotists lacked flexibility in such matters – the deadliest weapon against them was derisive laughter, and they knew it.

He crossed Quillas Canal at a lesser bridge, made his way into the less ostentatious north district, and eventually sauntered into a twisting, shadow-filled alley that had once been a dirt street, before the invention of four-wheeled wagons and side-by-side horse collars. Instead of the usual hovels and back doors that one might expect to find in such an alley, lining this one were shops that had not changed in any substantial way in the past seven hundred or so years. There, first to the right, the Half-Axe Temple of Herbs, smelling like a swamp's sinkhole, wherein one could find a prune-faced witch who lived in a mudpit, with all her precious plants crowding the banks, or growing in the insect-flecked pool itself. It was said she had been born in that slime and was only half human; and that her mother had been born there too, and her mother and so on. That such conceptions were immaculate went without saying, since Tehol could hardly imagine any reasonable or even unreasonable man taking that particular plunge.

Opposite the Half-Axe was the narrow-fronted entrance to a shop devoted to short lengths of rope and wooden poles a man and a half high. Tehol had no idea how such a specialized enterprise could survive, especially in this unravelled, truncated market, yet its door had remained open for almost six centuries, locked up each night by a short length of rope and a wooden pole.

The assortment proceeding down the alley was similar only in its peculiarity. Wooden stakes and pegs in one, sandal thongs in another – not the sandals, just the thongs. A shop selling leaky pottery – not an indication of incompetence: rather, the pots were deliberately made to leak at various, precise rates of loss; a place selling unopenable boxes, another toxic dyes. Ceramic teeth, bottles filled with the urine of pregnant women, enormous amphorae containing dead pregnant women; the excreta of obese hogs; and

miniature pets – dogs, cats, birds and rodents of all sorts, each one reduced in size through generation after generation of selective breeding – Tehol had seen guard dogs standing no higher than his ankle, and while cute and appropriately yappy, he had doubts as to their efficacy, although they were probably a terror for the thumbnail-sized mice and the cats that could ride an old woman's big toe, secured there by an ingenious loop in the sandal's thong.

Since the outlawing of the Rat Catchers' Guild, Adventure Alley had acquired a new function, to which Tehol now set about applying himself with the insouciance of the initiated. First, into the Half-Axe, clawing his way through the vines immediately beyond the entrance, then drawing up one step short of pitching head-first into the muddy pool.

Splashing, thick slopping sounds, then a dark-skinned wrinkled face appeared amidst the high grasses fringing the pit. 'It's you,' the witch said, grimacing then slithering out her overlong tongue to display all the leeches attached to it.

'And it's you,' Tehol replied.

The red protuberance with all its friends went back inside. 'Come in for a swim, you odious man.'

'Come out and let your skin recover, Munuga. I happen to know you're barely three decades old.'

'I am a map of wisdom.'

'As a warning against the perils of overbathing, perhaps. Where's the fat root this time?'

'What have you got for me first?'

'What I always have. The only thing you ever want from me, Munuga.'

'The only thing you'll never give, you mean!'

Sighing, Tehol drew out from under his makeshift sarong a small vial. He held it up for her to see.

She licked her lips, which proved alarmingly complicated.

'What kind?'

'Capabara roe.'

'But I want yours.'

'I don't produce roe.'

'You know what I mean, Tehol Beddict.'

'Alas, poverty is more than skin deep. Also, I have lost all incentive to be productive, in any sense of the word. After all, what kind of a world is this that I'd even contemplate delivering a child into?'

'Tehol Beddict, you cannot deliver a child. You're a man. Leave the delivering to me.'

'Tell you what, climb out of that soup, dry out and let me see what you're supposed to look like, and who knows? Extraordinary things might happen.'

Scowling, she held out an object. 'Here's your fat root. Give me that vial, then go away.'

'I so look forward to next time—'

'Tehol Beddict, do you know what fat root is used for?'

Her eyes had sharpened with suspicion, and Tehol realized that, were she indeed to dry out, she might be rather handsome after all, in a vaguely amphibian way. 'No, why?'

'Are you required to partake of it in some bizarre fashion?'

He shook his head.

'Are you certain? No unusual tea smelling yellow?'

'Smelling yellow? What does that mean?'

'If you smelled it, you'd know. Clearly, you haven't. Good. Get out, I'm puckering.'

A hasty departure, then, from the Half-Axe. Onward, to the entrance to Grool's Immeasurable Pots. Presumably, that description was intended to emphasize unmatched quality or something similar, since the pots themselves were sold as clocks, and for alchemical experiments and the like, and such functions were dependent on accurate rates of flow.

He stepped inside the cramped, damp shop.

'You're always frowning when you come in here, Tehol Beddict.'

'Good morning, Laudable Grool.'

'The grey one, yes, that one there.'

'A fine-looking pot—'

'It's a beaker, not a pot.'

'Of course.'

'Usual price.'

'Why do you always hide behind all those pots, Laudable Grool? All I ever see of you is your hands.'

'My hands are the only important part of me.'

'All right.' Tehol drew out a recently removed dorsal fin. 'A succession of spines, these ones from a capabara. Gradating diameters—'

'How do you know that?'

'Well, you can see it – they get smaller as they go back.'

'Yes, but how precise?'

'That's for you to decide. You demand objects with which to make holes. Here you have . . . what . . . twelve. How can you not be pleased by that?'

'Who said I wasn't pleased? Put them on the counter. Take the beaker. And get that damned fat root out of here.'

From there it was across to the small animals shop and Beastmonger Shill, an oversized woman endlessly bustling up and down the rows of tiny

stacked cages, on her flattened heels a piping, scurrying swarm of little creatures. She squealed her usual delight at the gifts of beaker and fat root, the latter of which, it turned out, was most commonly used by malicious wives to effect the shrinkage of their husbands' testicles; whilst Shill had, with some delicate modifications, applied the root's diminutive properties to her broods, feeding the yellow-smelling tea out in precise increments using the holed beaker.

The meeting soured when Tehol slapped at a mosquito on his neck, only to be informed he had just killed a pygmy blood-sucking bat. His reply that the distinction was lost on him was not well received. But Shill opened the trapdoor on the floor at the back of the shop nevertheless, and Tehol descended the twenty-six narrow, steep stone steps to the crooked corridor – twenty-one paces long – that led to the ancient, empty beehive tomb, the walls of which had been dismantled in three places to fashion rough doorways into snaking, low-ceilinged tunnels, two of which ended in fatal traps. The third passageway eventually opened out into a long chamber occupied by a dozen or so dishevelled refugees, most of whom seemed to be asleep.

Fortunately, Chief Investigator Rucket was not among the somnolent. Her brows rose when she saw him, her admirable face filling with an expression of unfeigned relief as she gestured him to her table. The surface was covered in parchment sheets depicting various floor plans and structural diagrams.

'Sit, Tehol Beddict! Here, some wine! Drink. By the Errant, a new face! You have no idea how sick I am of my interminable companions in this hovel.'

'Clearly,' he replied, sitting, 'you need to get out more.'

'Alas, most of my investigations these days are archival in nature.'

'Ah, the Grand Mystery you've uncovered. Any closer to a solution?'

'Grand Mystery? More like Damned Mystery, and no, I remain baffled, even as my map grows with every day that passes. But let's not talk any more about that. My agents report that the cracks in the foundation are

inexorably spreading – well done, Tehol. I always figured you were smarter than you looked.'

'Why thank you, Rucket. Have you got those lacquered tiles I asked for?'

'Onyx finished the last one this morning. Sixteen in all, correct?'

'Perfect. Bevelled edges?'

'Of course. All of your instructions were adhered to with diligence.'

'Great. Now, about that inexorable spreading—'

'You wish us to retire to my private room?'

'Uh, not now, Rucket. I need some coin. An infusion to bolster a capital investment.'

'How much?'

'Fifty thousand.'

'Will we ever see a return?'

'No, you'll lose it all.'

'Tehol, you certainly do take vengeance a long way. What is the benefit to us, then?'

'Why, none other than the return to pre-eminence of the Rat Catchers' Guild.'

Her rather dreamy eyes widened. 'The end of the Patriotists? Fifty thousand? Will seventy-five be better? A hundred?'

'No, fifty is what I need.'

'I do not anticipate any objections from my fellow Guild Masters.'

'Wonderful.' He slapped his hands together, then rose.

She frowned up at him. 'Where are you going?'

'Why, to your private room, of course.'

'Oh, how nice.'

His gaze narrowed on her. 'Aren't you joining me, Rucket?'

'What would be the point? The name "fat root" is a woman's joke, you know.'

'I haven't drunk any yellow-smelling tea!'

'In the future, I advise you to use gloves.'

'Where's your room, Rucket?'

One brow lifted. 'Got something to prove?'

'No, I just need to check on . . . things.'

'What's the point?' she asked again. 'Now that your imagination is awake, you'll convince yourself you've got smaller, Tehol Beddict. Human nature. Worse that you happen to be a man, too.' She rose. 'I, however, can be objective, albeit devastatingly so, on occasion. So, do you dare my scrutiny?'

He scowled. 'Fine, let's go. Next time, however, let us dispense entirely with the invitation to your room, all right?'

'Misery lies in the details, Tehol Beddict. As we're about to discover.'

Venitt Sathad unrolled the parchment and anchored its corners with flatstones. 'As you can see, Master, there are six separate buildings to the holdings.' He began pointing to the illustrations of each. 'Stables and livery. Icehouse. Drystore, with cellar. Servants' quarters. And, of course, the inn proper—'

'What of that square building there?' Rautos Hivanar asked.

Venitt frowned. 'As I understand it, the interior is virtually filled with an iconic object of some sort. The building predates the inn itself. Attempts to dislodge it failed. Now, what space remains is used for sundry storage.'

Rautos Hivanar leaned back in his chair. 'How solvent is this acquisition?'

'No more nor less than any other hostel, Master. It may be worth discussing investment on restoration with the other shareholders, including Karos Invictad.'

'Hmm, I will consider that.' He rose. 'In the meantime, assemble the new artifacts on the cleaning table on the terrace.'

'At once, Master.'

Fourteen leagues west of the Draconean Isles, doldrums had settled on this stretch of ocean, levelling the seas to a glassy, greasy patina beneath humid, motionless air. Through the eyeglass, the lone ship, black hull low in the water, looked lifeless. The mainmast was splintered, all rigging swept away. Someone had worked up a foresail, but the storm-rigged canvas hung limp. The steering oar was tied in place. No movement anywhere to be seen.

Skorgen Kaban, known as the Pretty, slowly lowered the eyeglass, yet continued squinting with his one good eye at the distant ship. He reached up to scratch one of the air holes – all that remained of what had once been a large, hawkish nose – then winced as a nail dug into sensitive scar tissue. The itch was non-existent, but the gaping nostrils had a tendency to weep, and the feigned scratch served to warn him of telltale wetness. This was one of his many gestures he probably imagined were subtle.

Alas, his captain was too sharp for that. She drew away her sidelong study of Skorgen, then glanced back at her waiting crew. A miserable but cocky bunch. Doldrums weighed everyone down, understandably, but the hold of the raider was packed with loot, and this run of the Errant's luck seemed without end.

Now that they'd found another victim.

Skorgen drew in a whistling breath, then said, 'It's Edur, all right. My guess is, a stray that got tossed around a bit in that storm we spied out west yesterday. Chances are, the crew's either sick or dead, or they abandoned ship in one of their Knarri lifeboats. If they did that, they'll have taken the good stuff with them. If not,' he grinned across at her, revealing blackened teeth, 'then we can finish what the storm started.'

'At the very least,' the captain said, 'we'll take a look.' She sniffed. 'At least maybe something will come of getting blown into the flats. Have 'em send out the sweeps, Skorgen, but keep that lookout's head spinning in every direction.'

Skorgen looked across at her. 'You think there might be more of 'em out here?'

She made a face. 'How many ships did the Emperor send out?'

His good eye widened, then he studied the lone derelict once more through the eyeglass. 'You think it's one of those? Errant's butt hole, Captain, if you're right . . .'

'You have your orders, and it seems I must remind you yet again, First Mate. No profanity on my ship.'

'Apologies, Captain.'

He hurried off, began relaying orders to the waiting crew.

Doldrums made for a quiet lot, a kind of superstitious furtiveness gripping the sailors, as if any sound reaching too far might crack the mirror of the sea.

She listened as the twenty-four sweeps slid out, blades settling in the water. A moment later came the muted callout of the cox, and the *Undying Gratitude* groaned as it lurched forward. Clouds of sleeper flies rose around the ship as the nearby sea's pellucid surface was disturbed. The damned things had a tendency to seek out dark cover once driven to flight. Sailors coughed and spat – all very well for them, the captain observed, as a whining cloud spun round her head and countless insects crawled up her nose, into her ears, and across her eyes. Sun and sea were bad enough, combining to assail her dignity and whatever vanity a woman who was dead could muster, but for Shurq Elalle, these flies made for profoundly acute misery.

Pirate, divine undead, strumpet of insatiability, witch of the deep waters – the times had been good ever since she first sailed out of the Letheras harbour, down the long, broad river to the western seas. Lean and sleek, that

first galley had been her passage to fame, and Shurq still regretted its fiery loss to that Mare escort in Laughter's End. But she was well pleased with the *Undying Gratitude*. Slightly too big for her crew, granted, but with their return to Letheras that problem could be solved easily enough. Her greatest sense of loss was with the departure of the Crimson Guard. Iron Bars had made it plain from the very start that they were working for passage. Even so, they'd been formidable additions on that wild crossing of the ocean, keeping the blood wake wide and unbroken as one merchant trader after another was taken, stripped of all valuables, then, more often than not, sent down into the dark. It hadn't been just their swords, deadly as those were, but the magery of Corlos – a magery far more refined, far more clever, than anything Shurq had witnessed before.

Such details opened her eyes, her mind as well. The world out there was huge. And in many fundamental ways, the empire of Lether, child of the First Empire, had been left in a kind of backwater, in its thinking, in its ways of working. A humbling revelation indeed.

The leavetaking with Iron Bars and his squad had not been quite as emotional or heartfelt for Shurq Elalle as it had probably seemed to everyone else, for the truth was, she had been growing ever more uneasy in their company. Iron Bars was not one to find subordination palatable for very long – oh, no doubt it was different when it came to his fellow Avowed among the Crimson Guard, or to their legendary commander, Prince K'azz. But she was not an Avowed, nor even one of that company's soldiers. So long as their goals ran in parallel, things were fine enough, and Shurq had made certain to never deviate, so as to avoid any confrontation.

They had deposited the mercenaries on a stony beach of the eastern shore of a land called Jacuruku, the sky squalling with sleeting rain. The landing had not been without witnesses, alas, and the last she'd seen of Iron Bars and his soldiers, they were turning inland to face a dozen massively armoured figures descending the broken slope, great-helmed with visors lowered. Brutal-looking bunch, and Shurq hoped all that belligerence was mostly for show. The grey sheets of rain had soon obscured all details from the strand as they pulled away on the oars back to the *Gratitude.*

Skorgen had sworn he'd caught the sound of blades clashing – a faint echo – with his one good ear, but Shurq herself had heard nothing.

In any case, they'd scurried from those waters, as pirates were wont to do when there was the risk of organized resistance lurking nearby, and Shurq consoled her agitated conscience by reminding herself that Iron Bars had spoken of Jacuruku with some familiarity – at least in so far as knowing its name. And as for Corlos's wide-eyed prayers to a few dozen divinities, well, he was prone to melodrama. A dozen knights wouldn't have been enough to halt Iron Bars and his Crimson Guard, determined as they were to do whatever it was they had to do, which, in this instance, was cross Jacuruku from one coast to the other, then find themselves another ship.

A huge world indeed.

The sweeps lifted clear of the water and were quietly shipped as the *Undying Gratitude* sidled up alongside the Edur wreck. Shurq Elalle moved to the rail and studied the visible deck of the Blackwood ship.

'Riding low,' Skorgen muttered.

No bodies amidst the clutter. But there *was* clutter. 'No orderly evacuation,' Shurq Elalle said, as grappling hooks sailed out, the tines biting as the lines were drawn taut. 'Six with us, weapons out,' she commanded, unsheathing her own rapier, then stepping up onto the rail.

She leapt across, landed lightly on the mid deck two strides from the splintered stump of the mainmast. Moments later Skorgen joined her, arriving with a grunt then a curse as he jarred his bad leg.

'This was a scrap,' he said, looking about. He limped back to the rail and tugged loose a splintered arrow shaft, then scowled as he studied it. 'Damned short and stubby – look at that head, that could punch through a bronze-sheeted shield. And this fletching – it's leather, like fins.'

So where were the bodies? Frowning, Shurq Elalle made her way to the cabin's hatchway. She paused at the hold, seeing that the hatch had been staved in. Nudging it aside with her boot, she crouched and looked down into the gloom of the hold.

The glimmer of water, and things floating. 'Skorgen, there's booty here. Come over and reach down for one of those amphorae.'

The second mate, Misery, called over from their ship, 'Captain! That hulk's lower in the water than it was when we arrived.'

She could now hear the soft groans of the hull.

Skorgen used his good arm to reach down and hook his hand through an ear of the amphora. Hissing with the weight, he lifted the hip-high object into view, rolling it onto the deck between himself and the captain.

The amphora itself was a gorgeous piece of work, Shurq observed. Foreign, the glaze cream in colour down to the inverted beehive base, where the coils were delineated in black geometric patterns on gleaming white. But it was the image painted on the shoulder and belly that captured her interest. Down low on one side there was a figure, nailed to an X-shaped cross. Whirling out from the figure's upturned head, there were crows. Hundreds, each one profoundly intricate, every detail etched – crows, flooding outward – or perhaps inward – to mass on the amphora's broad shoulders, encircling the entire object. Converging to feed on the hapless man? Fleeing him like his last, dying thoughts? Skorgen had drawn a knife and was cutting away at the seal, stripping away the thick wax binding the stopper. After a moment he succeeded in working it loose. He tugged the stopper free, then leapt back as thick blood poured forth, spreading on the deck.

It looked fresh, and from it rose a scent of flowers, pungent and oversweet.

'Kagenza pollen,' Skorgen said. 'Keeps blood from thickening – the Edur use it when they paint temples in the forest – you know, on trees. The blood sanctifies. It's not a real temple, of course. No walls, or ceiling, just a grove —'

'I don't like first mates who babble,' Shurq Elalle said, straightening once more. 'Get the others out. The vessels alone will make us rich for a month or two.' She resumed her walk to the cabin.

The corridor was empty, the cabin door broken open and hanging from one leather hinge. As she made her way towards it, she glanced into the side alcoves and saw the layered bunks of the crew – but all were unoccupied, although dishevelled as if subject to searching.

In the cabin itself, more signs of looting, while on the floor was spreadeagled an Edur corpse. Hands and feet had been spiked into the floorboards, and someone had used a knife on him, methodically. The room stank of spilled wastes, and the expression frozen on the face was a twisted, agony-racked mask, the eyes staring out as if witness to a shattered faith, a terrible revelation at the moment of death.

She heard Skorgen come up behind her, heard his low curse upon seeing the body. 'Tortured 'im,' he said. 'Tortured the captain. This one was Merude, damn near an Elder. Errant save us, Captain, we're gonna get blamed if anyone else comes on this afore it all sinks. Torture. I don't get that—'

'It's simple,' she said. 'They wanted information.'

'About what?'

Shurq Elalle looked round. 'They took the log, the charts. Now, maybe pirates might do that, if they were strangers to Lether, but then they'd have no need to torture this poor bastard. Besides, they'd have taken the loot. No, whoever did this wanted more information – not what you could get from charts. And they didn't give a damn about booty.'

'Nasty bastards, whoever they were.'

She thought back to that amphora and its grisly contents. Then turned away. 'Maybe they had a good reason. Hole the hull, Skorgen. We'll wait around, though. Blackwood doesn't like sinking. We may have to fire it.'

'A pyre to bring 'em all in, Captain.'

'I am aware of the risks. Get on with it.'

Back on the deck, Shurq Elalle made her way to the forecastle, where she stood scanning the horizon while Skorgen and the crew began their

demolition.

*Strangers on the sea.*

*Who are no friends of the Tiste Edur. Even so, I think I'd rather not meet them*. She turned to face the mid deck. 'Skorgen! When we're done here, we take to the sweeps. Back to the coast.'

His scarred brows rose. 'Letheras?'

'Why not? We can sell off and load up on crew.'

The battered man grinned.

*Back to Letheras, aye. And fast.*

# CHAPTER FOUR

The mutiny came that fell dawn, when through the heavy mists that had plagued us for ten days we looked to the east, and there saw, rising vast and innumerable on the cloud-bound horizon, dragons. Too large to comprehend, their heads above the sun, their folded wings reaching down to cast a shadow that could swallow all of Drene. This was too much, too frightening even for the more seasoned soldiers in our troop, for their dark eyes were upon us, an alien regard that drained the blood from our hearts, the very iron from our swords and spears.

To walk into those shadows would quail a champion of the First Empire. We could not face such challenge, and though I voiced my fury, my dismay, it was naught but the bolster demanded of any expedition's leader, and indeed, I had no intention of demanding of my party the courage that I myself lacked. Bolster is a dangerous thing, lest one succeeds where one would not. And so I ceased my umbrage, perhaps too easily yet none made account of that, relieved as they all were as we broke camp, packed our mules, and turned to the west.

*Four Days Into the Wildlands*
Thrydis Addanict

Banishment killed most victims, when the world beyond was harsh, when survival could not be purchased without the coin of co-operation. No graver punishment was possible among the tribal peoples, whether Awl or

D'rhasilhani or Keryn. Yet it was the clan structure itself that imposed deadly intransigence, and with it a corresponding devastation when one was cast out, alone, bereft of all that gave meaning to life. Victims crumpled into themselves, abandoning all skills that could serve to sustain them; they withered, then died.

The Letherii, and their vast cities, the tumult of countless faces, were – beyond the chains of Indebtedness – almost indifferent to banishing. True, such people were not immune to the notion of spiritual punishment – they existed in families, after all, a universal characteristic of humans – yet such scars as were delivered from estrangement were survivable. Another village, another city – the struggle of beginning again could be managed and indeed, for some, beginning anew became an addiction in its own right. A way of absolving responsibility.

Redmask, his life that of the Awl, unsullied for generations, had come to believe that the nature of the Letherii – his most hated enemy – had nevertheless stained his spirit. Banishment had not proved a death sentence. Banishment had proved a gift, for with it he discovered freedom. The very lure that drew so many young warriors into the Lether Empire, where anonymity proved both bane and emancipation.

Driven away, he had wandered far, with no thought of ever returning. He was not as he had once been, no longer the son of his father, yet what he had become was, even to himself, a mystery.

The sky overhead was unmarred by clouds, the new season finding its heat, and jackrabbits raced from one thicket of momentary cover to another ahead of him as he rode the Letherii horse on the herd trail on its northeasterly route. A small herd, he had noted, with few fly-swarmed birth-stains along the path's outskirts, where rodara males would gather protectively until the newborn was able to find its legs. The clan guiding these beasts was probably small.

Redmask's guardian K'Chain Che'Malle were nowhere to be seen, but that was not unusual. The huge reptiles had prodigious appetites. At this time of year, the wild bhederin that had wintered in pocket forests – a solitary, larger breed than those of the plains to the south – ventured out from cover

in search of mates. Massing more than two Letherii oxen, the bulls were ferocious and belligerent and would charge anything that approached too close, barring a female of its own kind. Sag'Churok, the male K'ell Hunter, delighted in meeting that thundering charge – Redmask had seen its pleasure, revealed in the slow sinuous lashing of the tail – as it stood in the bull's path, iron blades lifted high. As fast as the bhederin was, the K'Chain Che'Malle was faster. Each time after slaying the beast, Sag'Churok would yield the carcass to Gunth Mach, until she'd eaten her fill.

Redmask rode on through the day, his pace leisurely to ease the burden on the horse, and when the sun was descending towards the horizon, igniting distant storm clouds, he came within sight of the Awl encampment, situated on an ancient oxbow island between two dry eroded riverbeds. The herds were massed on the flanks of the valleys to either side and the sprawl of dome-shaped, sewn-hide huts huddled amidst the smoke of cookfires blanketing the valley.

No outriders. No pickets. And far too large a camp for the size of the herds.

Redmask reined in on the ridge line. He studied the scene below. Here and there, voices rose in ritual mourning. Few children were visible moving about between the huts.

After some time, as he sat motionless on the high Letherii saddle, someone saw him. Sudden cries, scurrying motion in the growing shadows, then a half-dozen warriors set out at a trot towards him.

Behind them, the camp had already begun a panicked breaking, sparks flying as hearths were kicked and stamped out. Hide walls rippled on the huts.

Herd and dray dogs appeared, racing to join the approaching warriors.

The Awl warriors were young, he saw as they drew closer. Only a year or two past their death nights. Not a single veteran among them. Where were the Elders? The shouldermen?

Halting fifteen paces downslope, the six warriors began conferring in hissed undertones, then one faced the encampment and loosed a piercing cry. All activity stopped below.

Faces stared up at Redmask. Not a single warrior among them seemed bold enough to venture closer.

The dogs were less cowed by the presence of a lone warrior. Growling, hackles raised, they crept in a half-circle towards him. Then, catching an unexpected scent, the beasts suddenly shrank back, tails dipping, thin whines coming from their throats.

Finally, one young warrior edged forward a step. 'You cannot be him,' he said.

Redmask sighed. 'Where is your war leader?' he demanded.

The youth filled his chest and straightened. 'I am this clan's war leader. Masarch, son of Nayrud.'

'When was your death night?'

'Those are the old ways,' Masarch said, baring his teeth in a snarl. 'We have abandoned such foolishness.'

Another spoke up behind the war leader. 'The old ways have failed us! We have cast them out!'

Masarch said, 'Remove that mask; it is not for you. You seek to deceive us. You ride a Letherii horse – you are one of the Factor's spies.'

Redmask made no immediate reply. His gaze slid past the war leader and his followers, fixing once more on the camp below. A crowd was gathering at the near edge, watching. He was silent for another twenty heartbeats, then he said, 'You have set out no pickets. A Letherii troop could line this ridge and plunge down into your midst, and you would not be prepared. Your women cry out their distress, a sound that can be heard for leagues on a still night like this. Your people are starving, war leader, yet they light an excess of fires, enough to make above you a cloud of smoke that will not move, and reflects the light from below. You have been culling the newborn rodara

and myrid, instead of butchering the ageing males and females past bearing. You must have no shouldermen, for if you did, they would bury you in the earth and force upon you the death night, so that you might emerge, born anew and, hopefully, gifted with new wisdom – wisdom you clearly lack.'

Masarch said nothing to that. He had finally seen Redmask's weapons. 'You are him,' he whispered. 'You have returned to the Awl'dan.'

'Which clan is this?'

'Redmask,' the war leader said, gesturing behind him. 'This clan . . . it is yours . . .'

Receiving naught but silence from the mounted warrior, Masarch added, 'We, we are all that remain. There are no shouldermen, Redmask. No witches.' He waved out towards the flanking herds. 'These beasts you see here, they are all that's left.' He hesitated, then straightened once more. 'Redmask, you have returned . . . for nothing. You do not speak, and this tells me that you see the truth of things. Great Warrior, *you are too late*.'

Even to this, Redmask was silent. He slowly dismounted. The dogs, which had continued their trepid circling, tails ducked, either picked up a fresh scent or heard something from the gloom beyond, for they suddenly broke and pelted back down the slope, disappearing into the camp. That panic seemed to ripple through the warriors facing him, but none fled, despite the fear and confusion gripping their expressions.

Licking his lips, Masarch said, 'Redmask, the Letherii are destroying us. Outrider camps have been ambushed, set upon and slaughtered, the herds stolen away. The Aendinar clan is no more. Sevond and Niritha remnants crawled to the Ganetok – only the Ganetok remains strong, for they are furthest east and, cowards that they are, they made pact with foreigners—'

'Foreigners.' Redmask's eyes narrowed in their slits. 'Mercenaries.'

Masarch nodded. 'There was a great battle, four seasons past, and those foreigners were destroyed.' He made a gesture. 'The Grey Sorcery.'

'Did not the victorious Letherii then march on the Ganetok camps?'

'No, Redmask, too few remained – the foreigners fought well.'

'Masarch,' he said, 'I do not understand. Did not the Ganetok fight alongside their mercenaries?'

The youth spat. 'Their war leader gathered from the clans fifteen thousand warriors. When the Letherii arrived, he fled, and the warriors followed. They abandoned the foreigners! Left them to slaughter!'

'Settle the camp below,' Redmask said. He pointed to the warriors standing behind Masarch. 'Stand first watch along this ridge line, here and to the west. I am now war leader to the Renfayar clan. Masarch, where hides the Ganetok?'

'Seven days to the east. They now hold the last great herd of the Awl.'

'Masarch, do you challenge my right to be war leader?'

The youth shook his head. 'You are Redmask. The Elders among the Renfayar who were your enemies are all dead. Their sons are dead.'

'How many warriors remain among the Renfayar?'

Masarch frowned, then gestured. 'You have met us, War Leader.'

'Six.'

A nod.

Redmask noted a lone dray dog sitting at the edge of the camp. It seemed to be watching him. He raised his left hand and the beast lunged into motion. The huge animal, a male, reached him moments later, dropping onto its chest and settling its wide, scarred head between Redmask's feet. He reached down and touched its snout – a gesture that, for most, would have risked fingers. The dog made no move.

Masarch was staring down at it with wide eyes. 'A lone survivor,' he said, 'from an outrider camp. It would not let us approach.'

'The foreigners,' Redmask said quietly, 'did they possess wardogs?'

'No. But they were sworn followers of the Wolves of War, and indeed, War Leader, it seemed those treacherous, foul beasts tracked them – always at a distance, yet in vast numbers. Until the Ganetok Elders invoked magic and drove them all away.' Masarch hesitated, then said, 'Redmask, the war leader among the Ganetok—'

Unseen behind the mask, a slow smile formed. 'Firstborn son of Capalah. Hadralt.'

'How did you know?'

'Tomorrow, Masarch, we drive the herds east – to the Ganetok. I would know more of those hapless foreigners who chose to fight for us. To die for the people of the Awl'dan.'

'We are to crawl to the Ganetok as did the Sevond and the Niritha?'

'You are starving. The herds are too weakened. I lead six youths none of whom has passed the death night. Shall the seven of us ride to war against the Letherii?'

Though young, it was clear that Masarch was no fool. 'You shall challenge Hadralt? Redmask, your warriors – we, we will all die. We are not enough to meet the hundreds of challenges that will be flung at us, and once we are dead, you will have to face those challenges, long before you are deemed worthy to cross weapons with Hadralt himself.'

'You will not die,' Redmask said. 'And none shall challenge any of you.'

'Then you mean to carve through a thousand warriors to face Hadralt?'

'What would be the point of that, Masarch? I need those warriors. Killing them would be a waste. No.' He paused, then said, 'I am not without guardians, Masarch. And I doubt that a single Ganetok warrior will dare challenge them. Hadralt shall have to face me, he and I, alone in the circle. Besides,' he added, 'we haven't the time for all the rest.'

'The Ganetok hold to the old ways, War Leader. There will be rituals. Days and days before the circle is made—'

'Masarch, we must go to war against the Letherii. Every warrior of the Awl—'

'War Leader! They will not follow you! Even Hadralt could only manage a third of them, and that with payment of rodara and myrid that halved his holdings!' Masarch waved at the depleted herds on the hillsides. 'We – we have nothing left! You could not purchase the spears of a hundred warriors!'

'Who holds the largest herds, Masarch?'

'The Ganetok themselves—'

'No. I ask again, who holds the largest herds?'

The youth's scowl deepened. 'The Letherii.'

'I will send three warriors to accompany the last of the Renfayar to the Ganetok. Choose two of your companions to accompany us.' The dray dog rose and moved to one side. Redmask collected the reins of his horse and set out down towards the camp. The dray fell in to heel on his left. 'We shall ride west, Masarch, and find us some herds.'

'We ride against the Letherii? War Leader, did you not moments ago mock the notion of seven warriors waging war against them? Yet now you say—'

'War is for later,' Redmask said. 'As you say, we need herds. To buy the services of the warriors.' He paused and looked back at the trailing youth. 'Where did the Letherii get their beasts?'

'From the Awl! From us!'

'Yes. They stole them. So we must steal them back.'

'Four of us, War Leader?'

'And one dray, and my guardians.'

'*What* guardians?'

Redmask resumed his journey. 'You lack respect, Masarch. Tonight, I think, you will have your death night.'

'The old ways are useless! I will not!'

Redmask's fist was a blur – it was questionable whether, in the gloom, Masarch even saw it – even as it connected solidly with the youth's jaw, dropping him in his tracks. Redmask reached down and grabbed a handful of hide jerkin, then began dragging the unconscious Masarch back down to the camp.

When the young man awoke, he would find himself in a coffin, beneath an arm's reach of earth and stones. None of the usual traditional, measured rituals prior to a death night, alas, the kind that served to prepare the chosen for internment. Of course, Masarch's loose reins displayed an appalling absence of respect, sufficient to obviate the gift of mercy, which in truth was what all those rituals were about.

Hard lessons, then. But becoming an adult depended on such lessons.

He expected he would have to pound the others into submission as well, which made for a long night ahead.

*For us all.*

The camp's old women would be pleased by the ruckus, he suspected. Preferable to wailing through the night, in any case.

The last tier of the buried city proved the most interesting, as far as Udinaas was concerned. He'd had his fill of the damned sniping that seemed to plague this fell party of fugitives, a testiness that seemed to be getting worse, especially from Fear Sengar. The ex-slave knew that the Tiste Edur wanted to murder him, and as for the details surrounding the abandonment of Rhulad – which made it clear that Udinaas himself had had no choice in the matter, that he had been as much a victim as Fear's own brother – well, Fear wasn't interested. Mitigating circumstances did not alter his intransigence, his harsh sense of right and wrong which did not, it appeared, extend to his own actions – after all, Fear had been the one to deliberately walk away from Rhulad.

Udinaas, upon regaining consciousness, should have returned to the Emperor.

*To do what? Suffer a grisly death at Rhulad's hands? Yes, we were almost friends, he and I – as much as might be possible between slave and master, and of that the master ever feels more generous and virtuous than the slave – but I did not ask to be there, at the madman's side, struggling to guide him across that narrow bridge of sanity, when all Rhulad wanted to do was leap head-first over the side at every step.* No, he had made do with what he had, and in showing that mere splinter of sympathy, he had done more for Rhulad than any of the Sengars – brothers, mother, father. More indeed than any Tiste Edur. *Is it any wonder none of you know happiness, Fear Sengar? You are all twisted branches from the same sick tree.*

There was no point in arguing this, of course. Seren Pedac alone might understand, might even agree with all that Udinaas had to say, but she wasn't interested in actually *being* one of this party. She clung to the role of Acquitor, a finder of trails, the reader of all those jealously guarded maps in her head. She liked not having to choose; better still, she liked not having to care.

A strange woman, the Acquitor. Habitually remote. Without friends . . . *yet she carries a Tiste Edur sword. Trull Sengar's sword. Kettle says he set it into her hands. Did she understand the significance of that gesture? She must have.* Trull Sengar had then returned to Rhulad. Perhaps the only brother who'd actually cared – where was he now? *Probably dead*.

Fresh, night-cooled air flowed down the broad ramp, moaned in the doorways situated every ten paces or so to either side. They were nearing the surface, somewhere in the saddleback pass – but on which side of the fort and its garrison? If the wrong side, then Silchas Ruin's swords would keen loud and long. The dead piled up in the wake of that walking white-skinned, red-eyed nightmare, didn't they just. The few times the hunters caught up with the hunted, they paid with their lives, yet they kept coming, and that made little sense.

*Almost as ridiculous as this mosaic floor with its glowing armies*. Images of lizard warriors locked in war, long-tails against short-tails, with the long-tails doing most of the dying, as far as he could tell. The bizarre slaughter beneath their feet spilled out into the adjoining rooms, each one, it seemed,

devoted to the heroic death of some champion – *Fouled K'ell, Naw'rhuk A'dat and Matrons*, said Silchas Ruin as, enwreathed in sorcerous light, he explored each such side chamber, his interest desultory and cursory at best. In any case, Udinaas could read enough into the colourful scenes to recognize a campaign of mutual annihilation, with every scene of short-tail victory answered with a Matron's sorcerous conflagration. The winners never won because the losers refused to lose. *An insane war*.

Seren Pedac was in the lead, twenty paces ahead, and Udinaas saw her halt and suddenly crouch, one hand lifting. The air sweeping in was rich with the scent of loam and wood dust. The mouth of the tunnel was small, overgrown and half blocked by angled fragments of basalt from what had once been an arched gate, and beyond was darkness.

Seren Pedac waved the rest forward. 'I will scout out ahead,' she whispered as they gathered about just inside the cave mouth. 'Did anyone else notice that there were no bats in that last stretch? That floor was clean.'

'There are sounds beyond human hearing,' Silchas Ruin said. 'The flow of air is channelled through vents and into tubes behind the walls, producing a sound that perturbs bats, insects, rodents and the like. The Short-Tails were skilled at such things.'

'So, not magic, then?' Seren Pedac asked. 'No wards or curses here?'

'No.'

Udinaas rubbed at his face. His beard was filthy, and there were things crawling in the snarls of hair. 'Just find out if we're on the right side of that damned fort, Acquitor.'

'I was making sure I wouldn't trip some kind of ancient ward stepping outside, Indebted, something that all these broken boulders suggests has happened before. Unless of course you want to rush out there yourself.'

'Now why would I do that?' Udinaas asked. 'Ruin gave you your answer, Seren Pedac; what are you waiting for?'

'Perhaps,' Fear Sengar said, 'she waits for you to be quiet. We shall all, I suppose, end up waiting for ever in that regard.'

'Tormenting you, Fear, gives me my only pleasure.'

'A sad admission indeed,' Seren Pedac murmured, then edged forward, over the tumbled rocks, and into the night beyond.

Udinaas removed his pack and settled down on the littered floor, dried leaves crunching beneath him. He leaned against a tilted slab of stone and stretched out his legs.

Fear moved up to crouch at the very edge of the cave mouth.

Humming to herself, Kettle wandered off into a nearby side chamber.

Silchas Ruin stood regarding Udinaas. 'I am curious,' he said after a time. 'What gives your life meaning, Letherii?'

'That's odd. I was just thinking the same of you, Tiste Andii.'

'Indeed.'

'Why would I lie?'

'Why wouldn't you?'

'All right,' Udinaas said. 'You have a point.'

'So you will not answer my question.'

'You first.'

'I do not disguise what drives me.'

'Revenge? Well, fine enough, I suppose, as a motivation – at least for a while and maybe a while is all you're really interested in. But let's be honest here, Silchas Ruin: as the sole meaning for existing, it's a paltry, pathetic cause.'

'Whereas you claim to exist to torment Fear Sengar.'

'Oh, he manages that all on his own.' Udinaas shrugged. 'The problem with questions like that is, we rarely find meaning to what we do until well after we've done it. At that point we come up with not one but thousands –

reasons, excuses, justifications, heartfelt defences. Meaning? Really, Silchas Ruin, ask me something interesting.'

'Very well. I am contemplating challenging our pursuers – no more of this unnecessary subterfuge. It offends my nature, truth be told.'

At the tunnel mouth, Fear turned to regard the Tiste Andii. 'You will kick awake a hornet's nest, Silchas Ruin. Worse, if this fallen god is indeed behind Rhulad's power, you might find yourself suffering a fate far more dire than millennia buried in the ground.'

'Fear's turning into an Elder before our eyes,' Udinaas said. 'Jumping at shadows. You want to take on Rhulad and Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan, Silchas Ruin, you have my blessing. Grab the Errant by the throat and tear this empire to pieces. Turn it all into ash and dust. Level the whole damned continent, Tiste Andii – we'll just stay here in this cave. Come collect us when you're finished.'

Fear bared his teeth at Udinaas. 'Why would he bother sparing us?'

'I don't know,' the ex-slave replied, raising an eyebrow. 'Pity?'

Kettle spoke from the side chamber's arched doorway. 'Why don't any of you like each other? I like all of you. Even Wither.'

'It's all right,' Udinaas said, 'we're all just tortured by who we are, Kettle.'

No-one said much after that.

* * *

Seren Pedac reached the edge of the forest, keeping low to remain level with the stunted trees. The air was thin and cold at this altitude. The stars overhead were bright and sharp, the dust-shrouded crescent moon still low on the horizon to the north. Around her was whispered motion through the clumps of dead leaves and lichen – a kind of scaled mouse ruled the forest floor at night, a species she had never seen before. They seemed unusually fearless, so much so that more than one had scampered across her boots. No predators, presumably. Even so, their behaviour was odd.

Before her stretched a sloped clearing, sixty or more paces, ending at a rutted track. Beyond it was a level stretch of sharp, jagged stones, loose enough to be treacherous. The fort squatting in the midst of this moat of rubble was stone-walled, thick at the base and tapering sharply to twice the height of a man. The corner bastions were massive, squared and flat-topped. On those platforms were swivel-mounted ballestae. Seren could make out huddled figures positioned around the nearest one, while other soldiers were visible, shoulders and heads, walking the raised platform on the other side of the walls.

As she studied the fortification, she heard the soft clunk of armour and weapons to her left. She shrank back as a patrol appeared on the rutted track. Motionless, breath held, she watched them amble past.

After another twenty heartbeats, she turned about and made her way back through the stunted forest. She almost missed the entrance to the cave mouth, a mere slit of black behind high ferns beneath a craggy overhang of tilted, layered granite. Pushing through, she stumbled into Fear Sengar.

'Sorry,' he whispered. 'We were beginning to worry, or, at least,' he added, 'I was.'

She gestured him back into the cave.

'Good news,' she said once they were inside. 'We're behind the garrison – the pass ahead should be virtually unguarded—'

'There are K'risnan wards up the trail,' Silchas Ruin cut in. 'Tell me of this garrison, Acquitor.'

Seren closed her eyes. *Wards? Errant take us, what game is Hannan Mosag playing here?* 'I could smell horses from the fort. Once we trip those wards they'll be after us, and we can't outrun mounted soldiers.'

'The garrison,' Silchas said.

She shrugged. 'The fort looks impregnable. I'd guess there's anywhere between a hundred and two hundred soldiers there. And with that many there's bound to be mages, as well as a score or more Tiste Edur.'

'Silchas Ruin is tired of being chased,' Udinaas said from where he lounged, back resting on a stone slab.

Dread filled Seren Pedac at these words. 'Silchas, can we not go round these wards?'

'No.'

She glanced across at Fear Sengar, saw suspicion and unease in the warrior's expression, but he would not meet her eyes. *What conversation did I just miss here?* 'You are no stranger to sorcery, Silchas Ruin. Could you put everyone in that fort to sleep or something? Or cloud their minds, make them confused?'

He gave her an odd look. 'I know of no sorcery that can achieve that.'

'Mockra,' she replied. 'The warren of Mockra.'

'No such thing existed in my day,' he said. 'The K'risnan sorcery, rotted through with chaos as it is, seems recognizable enough to me. I have never heard of this Mockra.'

'Corlos, the mage with Iron Bars – the Crimson Guard mercenaries – he could reach into minds, fill them with false terrors.' She shrugged. 'He said the magic of Holds and Elder Warrens has, almost everywhere else, been supplanted.'

'I had wondered at the seeming weakness of Kurald Galain in this land. Acquitor, I cannot achieve what you ask. Although, I do intend to silence everyone in that fort. And collect for us some horses.'

'Silchas, there are hundreds of Letherii there, not just soldiers. A fort needs support staff. Cooks, scullions, smiths, carpenters, servants—'

'And the Tiste Edur,' Fear added, 'will have slaves.'

'None of this interests me,' the Tiste Andii said, moving past Seren and leaving the mouth of the cave.

Udinaas laughed softly. 'Red Ruin stalks the land. We must heed this tale of righteous retribution gone horribly wrong. So, Fear Sengar, your epic

quest twists awry – what will you tell your grandchildren now?'

The Edur warrior said nothing.

Seren Pedac hesitated; she could hear Silchas Ruin walking away – a few strides crunching through leaves – then he was gone. She could hurry after him. Attempt one last time to dissuade him. Yet she did not move. In the wake of Ruin's passage the only sound filling the forest was the scurry and rustle of the scaled mice, in their thousands it seemed, all flowing in the same direction as the Tiste Andii. Sweat prickled like ice on her skin. *Look at us. Frozen like rabbits.*

*Yet what can I do? Nothing. Besides, it's not my business, is it? I am but a glorified guide. Not one of these here holds to a cause that matters to me. They're welcome to their grand ambitions. I was asked to lead them out, that's all.*

*This is Silchas Ruin's war. And Fear Sengar's.* She looked over at Udinaas and found him studying her from where he sat, eyes glittering, as if presciently aware of her thoughts, the sordid tracks each converging on a single, pathetic conclusion. *Not my business. Errant take you, Indebted.*

Mangled and misshapen, the K'risnan Ventrala reached up a scrawny, root-like forearm and wiped the sweat from his brow. Around him candles flickered, a forlorn invocation to Sister Shadow, but it seemed the ring of darkness in the small chamber was closing in on all sides, as inexorable as any tide.

He had woken half a bell earlier, heart pounding and breath coming in gasps. The forest north of the fort was seething with orthen, a rock-dwelling scaled creature unique to this mountain pass – since his arrival at the fort he had seen perhaps a half-dozen, brought in by the maned cats the Letherii locals kept. Those cats knew better than to attempt to eat the orthen, poison as they were, yet were not averse to playing with them until dead. Orthen avoided forest and soft ground. They dwelt among rocks. Yet now they swarmed the forest, and the K'risnan could feel something palpable from their presence, a stirring that tasted of bloodlust.

Should he crouch here in his room, terrified of creatures he could crush underfoot? He needed to master this unseemly panic – listen! He could hear nothing from the fort lookouts. No alarms shouted out.

But the damned orthen carpeted the forest floor up the pass, massing in unimaginable numbers, and that dread scaly flood was sweeping down, and Ventrala's panic rose yet higher, threatening to erupt from his throat in shrieks. He struggled to think.

Some kind of once in a decade migration, perhaps. Once in a century, even. A formless hunger. That and nothing more. The creatures would heave up against the walls, seethe for a time, then leave before the dawn. Or they'd flow around the fort, only to plunge from the numerous ledges and cliffs to either side of the approach. Some creatures were driven to suicide – yes, that was it . . .

The bloodlust suddenly burgeoned. The K'risnan's head rocked back, as if he'd just been slapped. Chills swept through him. He heard himself begin gibbering, even as he awakened the sorcery within him. His body flinched as chaotic power blossomed like poison in his muscles and bones. Sister Shadow had nothing to do with this magic racing through him, nothing at all, but he was past caring about such things.

Then, as shouts rose from the wall, K'risnan Ventrala sensed another presence in the forest beyond, a focus to all that bloodlust, a presence – and it was on its way.

Atri-Preda Hayenar awoke to distant shouts. An alarm was being raised, from the wall facing up-trail. And that, she realized as she quickly donned her uniform, made little sense. Then again, there wasn't much about this damned assignment that did. Pursue, she'd been told, but avoid contact. And now, one of those disgusting K'risnan had arrived, escorted by twenty-five Merude warriors. Well, if there was any real trouble brewing, she would let them handle it.

*Their* damned fugitives, after all. They could have them, with the Errant's blessing.

A moment later she was flung from her feet as a deafening concussion tore through the fort.

K'risnan Ventrala screamed, skidding across the floor to slam up against the wall, as a vast cold power swept over him, plucking at him as would a crow a rotted corpse. His own sorcery had recoiled, contracted into a trembling core deep in his chest – it had probed towards that approaching presence, probed until some kind of contact was achieved. And then Ventrala – and all that churning power within him – had been *rebuffed*.

Moments later, the fort's wall exploded.

Atri-Preda Hayenar stumbled from the main house and found the compound a scene of devastation. The wall between the up-trail bastions had been breached, the impact spilling huge pieces of stone and masonry onto the muster area. And the rock was burning – a black, sizzling coruscation that seemed to devour the stone even as it flared wild, racing across the rubble.

Broken bodies were visible amidst the wreckage, and from the stables – where the building's back wall leaned precariously inward – horses were screaming as if being devoured alive. Swarming over everything in sight were orthen, closing on fallen soldiers, and where they gathered, skin was chewed through and the tiny scaled creatures then burrowed in a frenzy into pulped meat.

Through the clouds of dust in the breach, came a tall figure with drawn swords.

White-skinned, crimson-eyed.

*Errant take me – he's had enough of running – the White Crow—*

She saw a dozen Tiste Edur appear near the barracks. Heavy throwing spears darted across the compound, converging on the ghastly warrior.

He parried them all aside, one after the other, and with each clash of shaft against blade the swords sang, until it seemed a chorus of deathly voices filled the air.

Hayenar, seeing a score of her Letherii soldiers arrive, staggered towards them. 'Withdraw!' she shouted, waving like a madwoman. 'Retreat, you damned fools!'

It seemed they had but awaited the command, as the unit broke into a rout, heading en masse for the down-trail gate.

One of the Tiste Edur closed on the Atri-Preda. '*What are you doing?*' he demanded. 'The K'risnan is coming – he'll slap this gnat down—'

'When he does,' she snarled, pulling back, 'we'll be happy to regroup!'

The Edur unsheathed his cutlass. 'Call them into battle, Atri-Preda – or I'll cut you down right here!'

She hesitated.

To their right, the other Tiste Edur had rushed forward and now engaged the White Crow.

The swords howled, a sound so filled with glee that Hayenar's blood turned to ice. She shook her head, watching, as did the warrior confronting her, as the White Crow carved his way through the Merude in a maelstrom of severed limbs, decapitations and disembowelling slashes that sent bodies reeling away.

'—your Letherii! Charge him, damn you!'

She stared across at the Edur warrior. 'Where's your K'risnan?' she demanded. '*Where is he?*'

Ventrala clawed his way into the corner of the room furthest from the conflagration outside. Endless, meaningless words were spilling from his drool-threaded mouth. His power had fled. Abandoning him here, in this cursed room. Not fair. He had done all that was asked of him. He had surrendered his flesh and blood, his heart and his very bones, all to Hannan Mosag.

There had been a promise, a promise of salvation, of vast rewards for his loyalty – once the hated youngest son of Tomad Sengar was torn down from the throne. They were to track Fear Sengar, the traitor, the betrayer, and

when the net was finally closed around him it would not be Rhulad smiling in satisfaction. No, Rhulad, the fool, knew nothing about any of this. The gambit belonged to Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King, who had had his throne stolen from him. And it was Hannan who, with Fear Sengar in his hands – and the slave, Udinaas – would work out his vengeance.

The Emperor needed to be stripped, every familiar face twisted into a mask of betrayal, stripped, yes, until he was completely alone. Isolated in his own madness.

Only then—

Ventrala froze, curled tight into a foetal ball, at soft laughter spilling towards him . . . *from inside his room!*

'Poor K'risnan,' it then murmured. 'You had no idea this pale king of the orthen would turn on you, this strider of battlefields. His road is a river of blood, you pathetic fool, and . . . oh! look! his patience, his forbearance – *it's all gone!*'

A wraith, here with him, whispering madness. 'Begone,' he hissed, 'lest you share my fate! I did not summon you—'

'No, you didn't. My chains to the Tiste Edur have been severed. By the one out there. Yes, you see, I am his, not yours. The White Crow's – hah, the Letherii surprised me there – but it was the mice, K'risnan . . . seems a lifetime ago now. In the forest north of Hannan Mosag's village. And an apparition – alas, no-one understands, no-one *takes note*. But that is not my fault, is it?'

'Go away—'

'I cannot. Will not, rather. Can you hear? Outside? It's all quiet now. Most of the Letherii got away, unfortunately. Tumbling like drunk goats down the stairs, with their captain among them – she was no fool. As for your Merude, well, they're all dead. Now, listen! Boots in the hallway – he's on his way!'

The terror drained away from Ventrala. There was no point, was there? At least, finally, he would be delivered from this racked, twisted cage of a

body. As if recalling the dignity it had once possessed, that body now lurched into motion, lifting itself into a sitting position, back pushed into the corner – it seemed to have acquired its own will, disconnected from Ventrala, from the mind and spirit that held to that name, that pathetic identity. Hannan Mosag had once said that the power of the Fallen One fed on all that was flawed and imperfect in one's soul, which in turn manifested in flesh and bone – what was then necessary was to teach oneself to exult in that power, even as it twisted and destroyed the soul's vessel.

Ventrala, with the sudden clarity that came with approaching death, now realized that it was all a lie. Pain was not to be embraced. Chaos was anathema to a mortal body. It ruined the flesh because it did not belong there. There was no exaltation in self-destruction.

A chorus of voices filled his skull, growing ever louder. *The swords . . .*

There was a soft scuffing sound in the hallway beyond, then the door squealed open.

Orthen poured in, flowing like grey foam in the grainy darkness. A moment later, the White Crow stepped into view. The song of the two swords filled the chamber.

Red, lambent eyes fixed on Ventrala.

The Tiste Andii then sheathed his weapons, muting the keening music. 'Tell me of this one who so presumes to offend me.'

Ventrala blinked, then shook his head. 'You think the Crippled God is interested in challenging you, Silchas Ruin? No, this . . . offence . . . it is Hannan Mosag's, and his alone. I understand that now, you see. It's why my power is gone. Fled. The Crippled God is not ready for the likes of you.'

The white-skinned apparition was motionless, silent, for a time. Then he said, 'If this Hannan Mosag knows my name, he knows too that I have reason to be affronted. By him. By all the Tiste Edur who have inherited the rewards of Scabandari's betrayal. Yet he provokes me.'

'Perhaps,' Ventrala said, 'Hannan Mosag presumed the Crippled God's delight in discord was without restraint.'

Silchas Ruin cocked his head. 'What is your name, K'risnan?'

Ventrala told him.

'I will let you live,' the Tiste Andii said, 'so that you may deliver to Hannan Mosag my words. The Azath cursed me with visions, its own memories, and so I was witness to many events on this world and on others. Tell Hannan Mosag this: a god in pain is not the same as a god obsessed with evil. Your Warlock King's obsessions are his own. It would seem, alas, that he is . . . confused. For that, I am merciful this night . . . and this night alone. Hereafter, should he resume his interference, he will know the extent of my displeasure.'

'I shall convey your words with precision, Silchas Ruin.'

'You should choose a better god to worship, Ventrala. Tortured spirits like company, even a god's.' He paused, then said, 'Then again, perhaps it is the likes of you who have in turn shaped the Crippled God. Perhaps, without his broken, malformed worshippers, he would have healed long ago.'

Soft rasping laughter from the wraith.

Silchas Ruin walked back through the doorway. 'I am conscripting some horses,' he said without turning round.

Moments later, the wraith slithered after him.

The orthen, which had been clambering about in seemingly aimless motion, now began to withdraw from the chamber.

Ventrala was alone once more. *To the stairs, find the Atri-Preda – an escort, for the journey back to Letheras. And I will speak to Hannan Mosag. And I will tell him about death in the pass. I will tell him of a Soletaken Tiste Andii with two knife wounds in his back, wounds that will not heal. Yet . . . he forbears.*

*Silchas Ruin knows more of the Crippled God than any of us, barring perhaps Rhulad. But he does not hate. No, he feels pity.*

*Pity, even for me.*

Seren Pedac heard the horses first, hoofs thumping at the walk up the forested trail. The night sky above the fort was strangely black, opaque, as if from smoke – yet there was no glow from flames. They had heard the concussion, the destruction of at least one stone wall, and Kettle had yelped with laughter, a chilling, grotesque sound. Then, distant screams and, all too quickly thereafter, naught but silence.

Silchas Ruin appeared, leading a dozen mounts, accompanied by sullen moaning from the scabbarded swords.

'And how many of my kin did you slay this time?' Fear Sengar asked.

'Only those foolish enough to oppose me. This pursuit,' he said, 'it does not belong to your brother. It is the Warlock King's. I believe we cannot doubt that he seeks what we seek. And now, Fear Sengar, the time has come to set our knives on the ground, the two of us. Perhaps Hannan Mosag's desires are a match to yours, but I assure you, such desires cannot be reconciled with mine.'

Seren Pedac felt a heaviness settle in the pit of her stomach. This had been a long time in coming, the one issue avoided again and again, ever excused to the demands of simple expediency. Fear Sengar could not win this battle – they all knew it. Did he intend to stand in Silchas Ruin's way? One more Tiste Edur to cut down? 'There is no compelling reason to broach this subject right now,' she said. 'Let's just get on these horses and ride.'

'No,' Fear Sengar said, eyes fixed on the Tiste Andii's. 'Let it be now. Silchas Ruin, in my heart I accept the truth of Scabandari's betrayal. You trusted him, and you suffered unimaginably in consequence. Yet how can we make reparation? We are not Soletaken. We are not ascendants. We are simply Tiste Edur, and so we fall like saplings before you and your swords. Tell me, how do we ease your thirst for vengeance?'

'You do not, nor is my killing your kin in any way an answer to my need. Fear Sengar, you spoke of reparation. Is this your desire?'

The Edur warrior was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he said, 'Scabandari brought us to this world.' 'Yours was dying.'

'Yes.'

'You may not be aware of this,' Silchas Ruin continued, 'but Bloodeye was partly responsible for the sundering of Shadow. Nonetheless, of greater relevance, to me, are the betrayals that came before that particular crime. Betrayals against my own kin – my brother, Andarist – which set such grief upon his soul that he was driven mad.' He slowly cocked his head. 'Did you imagine me naive in fashioning an alliance with Scabandari Bloodeye?'

Udinaas barked a laugh. 'Naive enough to turn your back on him.'

Seren Pedac shut her eyes. *Please, Indebted, just keep your mouth shut. Just this once.*

'You speak truth, Udinaas,' Silchas Ruin replied after a moment. 'I was exhausted, careless. I did not imagine he would be so . . . public. Yet, in retrospect, the betrayal had to be absolute – and that included the slaughter of my followers.'

Fear Sengar said, 'You intended to betray Scabandari, only he acted first. A true alliance of equals, then.'

'I imagined you might see it that way,' the Tiste Andii replied. 'Understand me, Fear Sengar. I will not countenance freeing the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye. This world has enough reprehensible ascendants.'

'Without Father Shadow,' Fear said, 'I cannot free Rhulad from the chains of the Crippled God.'

'You could not, even with him.'

'I do not believe you, Silchas Ruin. Scabandari was your match, after all. And I do not think the Crippled God hunts you in earnest. If it is indeed Hannan Mosag behind this endless pursuit, then the ones he seeks are myself and Udinaas. Not you. It is, perhaps, even possible that the Warlock King knows nothing of you – of who you are, beyond the mysterious White Crow.'

'That does not appear to be the case, Fear Sengar.'

The statement seemed to rock the Tiste Edur.

Silchas Ruin continued, 'Scabandari Bloodeye's body was destroyed. Against me, now, he would be helpless. A soul without provenance is a vulnerable thing. Furthermore, it may be that his power is already being . . . used.'

'By whom?' Fear asked, almost whispering.

The Tiste Andii shrugged. 'It seems,' he said with something close to indifference, 'that your quest is without purpose. You cannot achieve what you seek. I will offer you this, Fear Sengar. The day I choose to move against the Crippled God, your brother shall find himself free, as will all the Tiste Edur. When that time comes, we can speak of reparation.'

Fear Sengar stared at Silchas Ruin, then glanced, momentarily, at Seren Pedac. He drew a deep breath, then said, 'Your offer . . . humbles me. Yet I could not imagine what the Tiste Edur could gift you in answer to such deliverance.'

'Leave that to me,' the Tiste Andii said.

Seren Pedac sighed, then strode to the horses. 'It's almost dawn. We should ride until midday at least. Then we can sleep.' She paused, looked once more over at Silchas Ruin. 'You are confident we will not be pursued?'

'I am, Acquitor.'

'So, were there in truth wards awaiting us?'

The Tiste Andii made no reply.

As the Acquitor adjusted the saddle and stirrups on one of the horses to suit Kettle, Udinaas watched the young girl squatting on her haunches near the forest edge, playing with an orthen that did not seem in any way desperate to escape her attentions. The darkness had faded, the mists silver in the growing light.

Wither appeared beside him, like a smear of reluctant night. 'These scaled rats, Udinaas, came from the K'Chain Che'Malle world. There were larger ones, bred for food, but they were smart – smarter perhaps than they should have been. Started escaping their pens, vanishing into the mountains. It's

said there are some still left—' Udinaas grunted his derision. 'It's said? Been hanging round in bars, Wither?'

'The terrible price of familiarity – you no longer respect me, Indebted. A most tragic error, for the knowledge I possess—'

'Is like a curse of boredom,' Udinaas said, pushing himself to his feet. 'Look at her,' he said, nodding towards Kettle. 'Tell me, do you believe in innocence? Never mind; I'm not that interested in your opinion. By and large, I don't. Believe, that is. And yet, that child there . . . well, I am already grieving.'

'Grieving what?' Wither demanded.

'Innocence, wraith. When we kill her.'

Wither was, uncharacteristically, silent.

Udinaas glanced down at the crouching shade, then sneered. 'All your coveted knowledge . . .'

Seventeen legends described the war against the scaled demons the Awl called the Kechra; of those, sixteen were of battles, terrible clashes that left the corpses of warriors scattered across the plains and hills of the Awl'dan. Less a true war than headlong flight, at least in the first years. The Kechra had come from the west, from lands that would one day belong to the empire of Lether but were then, all those countless centuries ago, little more than blasted wastes – fly-swarmed marshlands of peat and rotten ice. A ragged, battered horde, the Kechra had seen battle before, and it was held in some versions of those legends that the Kechra were themselves fleeing, fleeing a vast, devastating war that gave cause to their own desperation.

In the face of annihilation, the Awl had learned how to fight such creatures. The tide was met, held, then turned.

Or so the tales proclaimed, in ringing, stirring tones of triumph.

Redmask knew better, although at times he wished he didn't. The war ended because the Kechra's migration reached the easternmost side of the Awl'dan, and then continued onward. Granted, they had been badly mauled

by the belligerent ancestors of the Awl, yet, in truth, they had been almost indifferent to them – an obstacle in their path – and the death of so many of their own kind was but one more ordeal in a history of fraught, tragic ordeals since coming to this world.

Kechra. K'Chain Che'Malle, the Firstborn of Dragons.

There was, to Redmask's mind, nothing palatable or sustaining about knowledge. As a young warrior, his world had been a single knot on the rope of the Awl people, his own deliberate binding to the long, worn history of bloodlines. He had never imagined that there were so many other ropes, so many intertwined threads; he had never before comprehended how vast the net of existence, nor how tangled it had become since the Night of Life – when all that was living came into being, born of deceit and betrayal and doomed to an eternity of struggle.

And Redmask had come to understand struggle – there in the startled eyes of the rodara, the timid fear of the myrid; in the disbelief of a young warrior dying on stone and wind-blown sand; in the staring comprehension of a woman surrendering her life to the child she pushed out from between her legs. He had seen elders, human and beast, curl up to die; he had seen others fight for their last breath with all the will they could muster. Yet in his heart, he could find no reason, no reward waiting beyond that eternal struggle.

Even the spirit gods of his people battled, flailed, warred with the weapons of faith, with intolerance and the sweet, deadly waters of hate. No less confused and sordid than any mortal.

The Letherii wanted, and want invariably transformed into a moral right to possess. Only fools believed such things to be bloodless, either in intent or execution.

Well, by the same argument – by its very fang and talon – there existed a moral right to defy them. And in such a battle, there would be no end until one side or the other was obliterated. More likely, both sides were doomed to suffer that fate. This final awareness is what came from too much knowledge.

Yet he would fight on.

These plains he and his three young followers moved through had once belonged to the Awl. Until the Letherii expanded their notion of self-interest to include stealing land and driving away its original inhabitants. Cairn markers and totem stones had all been removed, the boulders left in heaps; even the ring-stones that had once anchored huts were gone. The grasses were overgrazed, and here and there long rectangular sections had seen the earth broken in anticipation of planting crops, fence posts stacked nearby. But Redmask knew that this soil was poor, quickly exhausted except in the old river valleys. The Letherii might manage a generation or two before the topsoil blew away. He had seen the results east of the wastelands, in far Kolanse – an entire civilization tottering on the edge of starvation as desert spread like plague.

The blurred moon had lifted high in the star-spattered night sky as they drew closer to the mass of rodara. There was little point in going after the myrid – the beasts were not swift runners over any reasonable distance – but as they edged closer, Redmask could see the full extent of this rodara herd. Twenty thousand head, perhaps even more.

A large drover camp, lit by campfires, commanded a hilltop to the north. Two permanent buildings of cut-log walls and sod-capped roofs overlooked the shallow valley and the herds – these would, Redmask knew, belong to the Factor's foreman, forming the focus for the beginning of a true settlement.

Crouched in the grasses at the edge of a drainage gully cutting through the valley side, the three young warriors on his left, Redmask studied the Letherii for another twenty heartbeats; then he gestured Masarch and the others back into the gully itself.

'This is madness,' the warrior named Theven whispered. 'There must be a hundred Letherii in that camp – and what of the shepherds and their dogs? If the wind shifts . . .'

'Quiet,' said Redmask. 'Leave the dogs and the shepherds to me. As for the camp, well, they will soon be busy enough. Return to the horses, mount

up, and be ready to flank and drive the herd when it arrives.'

In the moon's pale light, Masarch's expression was nerve-twisted, a wild look in his eyes – he had not done well on his death night, but thus far he appeared more or less sane. Both Theven and Kraysos had, Redmask suspected, made use of bledden herb smuggled with them into their coffins, which they chewed to make themselves insensate, beyond such things as panic and convulsions. Perhaps that was just as well. But Masarch had possessed no bledden herb. And, as was common to people of open lands, confinement was worse than death, worse than anything one could imagine.

Yet there was value in searing that transition into adulthood, rebirth that began with facing oneself, one's own demonic haunts that came clambering into view in grisly succession, immune to every denial. With the scars born of that transition, a warrior would come to understand the truth of imagination: that it was a weapon the mind drew at every turn, yet as deadly to its wielder as to its conjured foes. Wisdom arrived as one's skill with that weapon grew – *we fight every battle with our imaginations: the battles within, the battles in the world beyond. This is the truth of command, and a warrior must learn command, of oneself and of others*. It was possible that soldiers, such as the Letherii, experienced something similar in attaining rank, but Redmask was not sure of that.

Glancing back, he saw that his followers had vanished into the darkness. Probably, he judged, now at their horses. Waiting with fast, shallow breaths drawn into suddenly tight lungs. Starting at soft noises, gripping their reins and weapons in sweat-layered hands.

Redmask made a soft grunting sound and the dray, lying on its belly, edged closer. He settled a hand on its thick-furred neck, briefly, then drew it away. Together, the two set out, side by side, both low to the ground, towards the rodara herd.

Abasard walked slowly along the edge of the sleeping herd to keep himself alert. His two favoured dogs trotted in his wake. Born and raised as an Indebted in Drene, the sixteen-year-old had not imagined a world such as this – the vast sky, sprawling darkness and countless stars at night, enormous and depthless at day; the way the land itself reached out

impossible distances, until at times he could swear he saw a curvature to the world, as if it existed like an island in the sea of the Abyss. And so much life, in the grasses, in the sky. In the spring tiny flowers erupted from every hillside, with berries ripening in the valleys. All his life, until his family had accompanied the Factor's foreman, he had lived with his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, with his grandmother and two aunts – all crowded into a house little more than a shack, facing onto a rubbish-filled alley that stank of urine. The menagerie of his youth was made up of rats, blue-eyed mice, meers, cockroaches, scorpions and silverworms.

But here, in this extraordinary place, he had discovered a new life. Winds that did not stink with rot and waste. And there was room, so much room. He had witnessed with his own eyes a return to health among the members of his family – his frail little sister now wiry and sun-darkened, ever grinning; his grandmother, whose cough had virtually vanished; his father, who stood taller now, no longer hunched beneath low-ceilinged shacks and worksheds. Only yesterday, Abasard had heard him laugh, for the very first time.

Perhaps, the youth dared believe, once the land was broken and crops were planted, there would be the chance to work their way free of debt. Suddenly, all things seemed possible.

His two dogs loped past him, vanished in the gloom ahead. A not unusual occurrence. They liked to chase jackrabbits, or low-flying rhinazan. He heard a brief commotion in the grasses just beyond a slight rise. Abasard adjusted his grip on the staff he carried, increased his pace – if the dogs had trapped and killed a jackrabbit, there would be extra meat in the stew tomorrow.

Reaching the rise, he paused, searched the darkness below for his dogs. They were nowhere to be seen. Abasard frowned, then let out a low whistle, expecting at any moment to hear them trot back to him. Yet only silence answered his summons. Confused, he slowly dropped into a crouch.

Ahead and to his right, a few hundred rodara shifted – awake and restless now.

Something was wrong. Wolves? The Bluerose cavalry the foreman kept under contract had hunted the local ones down long ago. Even the coyotes had been driven away, as had the bears.

Abasard crept forward, his mouth suddenly dry, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

His free hand, reaching out before him, came into contact with soft, warm fur. One of his dogs, lying motionless, still under his probing touch. Near its neck, the fur was wet. He reached down along it until his fingers sank into torn flesh where its throat should have been. The wound was ragged. *Wolf. Or one of those striped cats*. But of the latter he had only ever seen skins, and those came from the far south, near Bolkando Kingdom.

Truly frightened now, he continued on, and moments later found his other dog. This one had a broken neck. The two attacks, he realized, had to have been made simultaneously, else one or the other of the beasts would have barked.

A broken neck . . . but no other wounds, no slather of saliva on the fur.

The rodara heaved a half-dozen paces to one side again, and he could make out, at the very edge of his vision, their heads lifted on their long necks, their ears upright. Yet no fear-sounds came from them. So, no dangerous scent, no panic – *someone has their attention. Someone they're used to obeying*.

There was no mistaking this – the herd was being stolen. Abasard could not believe it. He turned about, retracing his route. Twenty paces of silent footfalls later, he set out into a run – back to the camp.

Redmask's whip snaked out to wrap round the shepherd's neck – the old Letherii had been standing, outlined well against the dark, staring mutely at the now-moving herd. A sharp tug from Redmask and the shepherd's head rolled from the shoulders, the body – arms jerking momentarily out to the sides – falling to one side.

The last of them, Redmask knew, as he moved up. Barring one, who had been smart enough to flee, although that would not save him in the end.

Well, invaders had to accept the risks – they were thieves as well, weren't they? Luxuriating in their unearned wealth, squatting on land not their own, arrogant enough to demand that it change to suit their purposes. As good as pissing on the spirits in the earth – one paid for such temerity and blasphemy.

He pushed away that last thought as unworthy. The spirits could take care of themselves, and they would deliver their own vengeance, in time – for they were as patient as they were inexorable. It was not for Redmask to act on behalf of those spirits. No, that form of righteousness was both unnecessary and disingenuous. The truth was this: Redmask enjoyed being the hand of Awl vengeance. Personal and, accordingly, all the more delicious.

He had already begun his killing of the Letherii, back in Drene.

Drawing his knife as he crouched over the old man's severed head, he cut off the Letherii's face, rolled it up and stored it with the others in the salt-crusted bag at his hip.

Most of the herd dogs had submitted to the Awl dray's challenge – they now followed the larger, nastier beast as it worked to waken the entire herd, then drive it en masse eastward.

Straightening, Redmask turned as the first screams erupted from the drover camp.

Abasard was still forty paces from the camp when he saw one of the tents collapse to one side, poles and guides snapping, as an enormous two-legged creature thumped over it, talons punching through to the struggling forms beneath, and screams tore through the air. Head swivelling to one side, the fiend continued on in its loping, stiff-tailed gait. There were huge swords in its hands.

Another one crossed its path, fast, low, heading for the foreman's house. Abasard saw a figure dart from this second beast's path – but not quickly enough, as its head snapped forward, twisting so that its jaws closed to either side of the man's head. Whereupon the reptile threw the flailing form

upward in a bone-breaking surge. The limp corpse sailed in the air, landing hard and rolling into the hearth fire in a spray of sparks.

Abasard stood, paralysed by the horror of the slaughter he saw before him. He had recognized that man. Another Indebted, a man who had been courting one of his aunts, a man who always seemed to be laughing.

Another figure caught his eye. His baby sister, ten years old, racing out from the camp – away from another tent whose inhabitants were dying beneath chopping swords – *our tent. Father—*

The reptile lifted its head, saw his sister's fleeting form, and surged after her.

All at once, Abasard found himself running, straight for the monstrous creature.

If it saw him converging, it was indifferent – until the very last moment, as Abasard raised his staff to swing overhand, hoping to strike the beast on its hind leg, imagining bones breaking—

The nearer sword lashed out, so fast, so—

Abasard found himself lying on sodden grasses, feeling heat pour from one side of his body, and as the heat poured out, he grew ever colder. He stared, seeing nothing yet, sensing how something was wrong – he was on his side, but his head was flattened down, his ear pressed to the ground. There should have been a shoulder below and beneath his head, and an arm, and it was where all the heat was pouring out.

And further down, the side of his chest, this too seemed to be gone.

He could feel his right leg, kicking at the ground. But no left leg. He did not understand.

Slowly, he settled onto his back, stared up at the night sky.

So much room up there, a ceiling beyond the reach of everyone, covering a place in which they could live. Uncrowded, room enough for all.

He was glad, he realized, that he had come here, to see, to witness, to understand. Glad, even as he died.

Redmask walked out of the dark to where Masarch waited with the Letherii horse. Behind him, the rodara herd was a mass of movement, the dominant males in the lead, their attention fixed on Redmask. Dogs barked and nipped from the far flanks. Distant shouts from the other two young warriors indicated they were where they should be.

Climbing into the saddle, Redmask nodded to Masarch then swung his mount round.

Pausing for a long moment, Masarch stared at the distant Letherii camp, where it seemed the unholy slaughter continued unabated. *His guardians, he'd said.*

*He does not fear challenges to come. He will take the fur of the Ganetok war leader. He will lead us to war against the Letherii. He is Redmask, who forswore the Awl, only to now return.*

*I thought it was too late.*

*I now think I am wrong.*

He thought again of his death night, and memories returned like winged demons. He had gone mad, in that hollowed-out log, gone so far mad that hardly any of him had survived to return, when the morning light blinded him. Now, the insanity was loose, tingling at the very ends of his limbs, loose and wild but as yet undecided, not yet ready to act, to show its face. There was nothing to hold it back. No-one.

*No-one but Redmask. My war leader.*

*Who unleashed his own madness years ago.*

# CHAPTER FIVE

Denigration afflicted our vaunted ideals long ago, but such inflictions are difficult to measure, to rise up and point a finger to this place, this moment, and say: here, my friends, this was where our honour, our integrity died.

The affliction was too insipid, too much a product of our surrendering mindful regard and diligence. The meanings of words lost their precision – and no-one bothered taking to task those who cynically abused those words to serve their own ambitions, their own evasion of personal responsibility. Lies went unchallenged, lawful pursuit became a sham, vulnerable to graft, and justice itself became a commodity, mutable in imbalance. Truth was lost, a chimera reshaped to match agenda, prejudices, thus consigning the entire political process to a mummer's charade of false indignation, hypocritical posturing and a pervasive contempt for the commonry.

Once subsumed, ideals and the honour created by their avowal can never be regained, except, alas, by outright, unconstrained rejection, invariably instigated by the commonry, at the juncture of one particular moment, one single event, of such brazen injustice that revolution becomes the only reasonable response.

Consider this then a warning. Liars will lie, and continue to do so, even beyond being caught out. They will lie, and in time, such liars will convince

themselves, will in all self-righteousness divest the liars of culpability. Until comes a time when one final lie is voiced, the one that can only be answered by rage, by cold murder, and on that day, blood shall rain down every wall of this vaunted, weaning society.

Impeached Guild Master's Speech
Semel Fural of the Guild of Sandal-Clasp Makers

Of the turtles known as vinik the females dwelt for the most part in the uppermost reaches of the innumerable sources of the Lether River, in the pooled basins and high-ground bogs found in the coniferous forests crowding the base of the Bluerose Mountains. The mountain runoff, stemmed and backed by the dams built by flat-tailed river-rats, descended in modest steps towards the broader, conjoined tributaries feeding the vast river. Vinik turtles were long-shelled and dorsal-ridged, and their strong forelimbs ended in taloned hands bearing opposable thumbs. In the egg-laying season, the females – smaller by far than their male kin of the deep rivers and the seas – prowled the ponds seeking the nests of waterfowl. Finding one large enough and properly accessible, the female vinik would appropriate it. Prior to laying her own eggs, the turtle exuded a slime that coated the bird eggs, the slime possessing properties that suspended the development of those young birds. Once the vinik's clutch was in place, the turtle then dislodged the entire nest, leaving it free to float, drawn by the current. At each barrier juvenile male vinik were gathered, to drag the nests over dry ground so that they could continue their passive migration down to the Lether River.

Many sank, or encountered some fatal obstacle on their long, arduous journey to the sea. Others were raided by adult vinik dwelling in the depths of the main river. Of those nests that made it to sea, the eggs hatched, the hatchlings fed on the bird embryos, then slipped out into the salty water. Only upon reaching juvenile age – sixty or seventy years – would the new generation of vinik begin the years-long journey back up the river, to those distant, murky ponds of the Bluerose boreal forest.

Nests bobbed in the waters of the Lether River as it flowed past the Imperial City, Letheras, seat of the Emperor. Local fisher boats avoided them, since large vinik males sometimes tracked the nests just beneath the surface – and provided they weren't hungry enough to raid the nest, they would defend it. Few fisher folk willingly challenged a creature that could weigh as much as a river galley and was capable of tearing such a galley to pieces with its beak and its clawed forearms.

The arrival of the nests announced the beginning of summer, as did the clouds of midges swarming over the river, the settling of the water level and the reek of exposed silts along the banks.

On the faint rise behind the Old Palace, the dishevelled expanse where stood the foundations of ancient towers, and one in particular constructed of black stone with a low-walled yard, a hunched, hooded figure dragged himself towards the gateway step by aching, awkward step. His spine was twisted, pushed by past ravages of unconstrained power until the ridge of each vertebra was visible beneath the threadbare cloak, the angle forcing his shoulders far forward so that the unkempt ground before him was within reach of his arms, which he used to pull his broken body along.

He came searching for a nest. A mound of ragged earth and dying grasses, a worm-chewed hole into a now dead realm. Questing with preternatural senses, he moved through the yard from one barrow to the next. Empty . . . empty . . . empty.

Strange insects edged away from his path. Midges spun in cavorting swirls over him, but would not alight to feed, for the searcher's blood was rotted with chaos. The day's dying light plucked at his misshapen shadow, as if seeking sense of a stain so malign on the yard's battered ground.

Empty . . .

But this one was not. He allowed himself a small moment of glee. Suspicions confirmed, at last. The place that was dead . . . was not entirely dead. Oh, the Azath was now nothing more than lifeless stone, all power and all will drained away. Yet some sorcery lingered, here, beneath this oversized mound ringed in shattered trees. Kurald for certain. Probably

Galain – the stink of Tiste Andii was very nearly palpable. Binding rituals, a thick, interwoven skein to keep something . . . someone . . . *down*.

Crouched, the figure reached with his senses, then suddenly recoiled, breath hissing from between mangled lips.

*It has begun unravelling! Someone has been here – before me! Not long.* Sorcery, working the release of this imprisoned creature. *Father of Shadows, I must think!* Hannan Mosag remained motionless, hunched at the very edge of this mound, his mind racing.

Beyond the ruined grounds, the river flowed on, down to the distant sea. Carried on its current, vinik nests spun lazily; milky green eggs, still warm with the day's heat, enclosed vague shapes that squirmed about, eager for the birth of light.

She lifted her head with a sharp motion, blood and fragments of human lung smearing her mouth and chin, sliding then dripping down into the split-open ribcage of her victim – a fool who, consumed by delusions of domination and tyranny no doubt, had chosen to stalk her all the way from Up Markets. It had become a simple enough thing, a lone, seemingly lost woman of high birth, wandering through crowds unaware of the hooded looks and expressions of avarice tracking her. She was like the bait the fisher folk used to snare brainless fish in the river. True, while she remained hooded, her arms covered in shimmering silk the hue of raw ox-heart, wearing elegant calf-leather gloves, as well as close-wrapped leggings of black linen, there was no way anyone could see the cast of her skin, nor her unusual features. And, despite the Tiste Edur blood coursing diluted in her veins, she was not uncommonly tall, which well suited her apparent vulnerability, for it was clear that these Edur occupiers in this city were far too dangerous to be hunted by the common Letherii rapist.

She had led him into an alley, whereupon she drove one hand into his chest, tearing out his heart. But it was the lungs she enjoyed the most, the pulpy meat rich with oxygen and not yet soured by the rank juices of violent death.

The mortal realm was a delightful place. She had forgotten that.

But now, her feeding had been interrupted. Someone had come to the Azath grounds. Someone had probed her rituals, which had been dissolving the binding wards set by Silchas Ruin. There could be trouble there, and she was not inclined to suffer interference in her plans.

Probably the Errant, that meddling bastard. Or, even more alarming, that Elder God, Mael. A miserably crowded city, this Letheras – she had no intention of tarrying overlong here, lest her presence be discovered, her schemes knocked awry.

Wiping her mouth and chin with the back of one sleeved forearm, she straightened from her feast, then set off.

Rautos Hivanar, head of the Liberty Consign, squatted on the muddy bank of the river, the work crews finishing the day's excavation directly behind him, the pump crews already washing down, the sounds from the estate's back kitchen rising with the approaching demands of supper. He was making a point of feeding his diggers well, as much to ease their bemusement as to keep them working. They were now excavating way below the river level, after all, and if not for the constantly manned pumps, they would be working chest-deep in muddy water. As it was, the shoring on the walls needed continual attention, prone as they were to sag inward.

Eyes tracking a half-dozen vinik nests rafting down the river, Rautos Hivanar was lost in thought. There had been more mysterious objects, buried deep and disconnected, but he had begun to suspect that they all belonged together; that in an as yet inconceivable way they could be assembled into a kind of mechanism. Some central piece remained undiscovered, he believed. Perhaps tomorrow . . .

He heard slippered feet on the plank walkway leading down to the river, and a moment later came Venitt Sathad's voice. 'Master.'

'Venitt, you have allotted yourself two house guards for the journey. Take two more. And, accordingly, two more packhorses. You will travel without a supply wagon, as agreed, but that need not be a reason to reduce your level of comfort.'

'Very well, Master.'

'And remember, Venitt. Letur Anict is in every way the de facto ruler of Drene, regardless of the Edur governor's official status. I am informed that you will find Orbyn Truthfinder, the Invigilator's agent, a reliable ally. As to Letur Anict . . . the evidence points to the Factor's having lost . . . perspective. His ambition seems without restraint, no longer harnessed to reason or, for that matter, common sense.'

'I shall be diligent in my investigation, Master.'

Rautos Hivanar rose and faced his servant. 'If needs must, Venitt, err on the side of caution. I would not lose you.'

A flicker of something like surprise in the Indebted's lined face, then the man bowed. 'I will remain circumspect, Master.'

'One last thing,' Rautos said as he moved past Venitt on his way up to the estate. 'Do not embarrass me.'

The Indebted's eyes tracked his master for a moment, his expression once more closed.

Unseen behind them on the river, a huge shape lifted beneath one vinik nest, and breaking the water as the nest overturned was the prow ridge of an enormous shell, and below that a sinewy neck and a vast, gaping beak. Swallowing the nest entire.

The currents then carried the disturbance away, until no sign of it remained.

'You know, witnessing something is one thing. Understanding it another.'

Bugg turned away from his study of the distant river, where the setting sun's light turned the water into a rippled sheet of beaten gold, and frowned at Tehol Beddict. 'Very pondering of you, Master.'

'It was, wasn't it? I have decided that it is my normal eye that witnesses, while it is my blue eye that understands. Does that make sense to you?'

'No.'

'Good, I'm glad.'

'The night promises to be both heavy and hot, Master. And I suggest the mosquito netting.'

'Agreed. Can you get to it? I can't reach.'

'You could if you stretched an arm.'

'What's your point?'

'Nothing. I admit to some . . . distraction.'

'Just now?'

'Yes.'

'Are you over it yet?'

'Almost. Alas, certain individuals are stirring in the city this evening.'

'Well, are you going to do something about it or do I have to do everything around here?'

Bugg walked across the roof to stand beside the bed. He studied the reposed form of Tehol Beddict for a moment, then he collected the netting and draped it over his master.

Eyes, one brown, the other blue, blinked up at him. 'Shouldn't there be a frame or something? I feel I am being readied for my own funeral here.'

'We used the frame for this morning's fire.'

'Ah. Well, is this going to keep me from being bitten?'

'Probably not, but it looks rather fetching.'

Tehol closed his blue eye. 'I see . . .'

Bugg sighed. 'Gallows humour, Master.'

'My, you are in a state, aren't you?'

'I am undecided,' Bugg said, nodding. 'Yes I know, one of my eternal flaws.'

'What you require, old friend, is a mortal's perspective on things. So let's hear it. Lay out the dilemma for me, Bugg, so that I might provide you with a properly pithy solution.'

'The Errant follows the Warlock King, to see what he plans. The Warlock King meddles with nefarious rituals set in place by another ascendant, who in turn leaves off eating a freshly killed corpse and makes for an unexpected rendezvous with said Warlock King, where they will probably make each other's acquaintance then bargain to mutual benefit over the crumbling chains binding another ascendant – one soon to be freed, which will perturb someone far to the north, although that one is probably not yet ready to act. In the meantime, the long-departed Edur fleet skirts the Draconean Sea and shall soon enter the river mouth on its fated return to our fair city, and with it are two fell champions, neither of whom is likely to do what is expected of them. Now, to add spice to all of that, the secret that is the soul of one Scabandari Bloodeye will, in a depressingly short time, cease to be a secret, and consequently and in addition to and concomitant with, we are in for an interesting summer.'

'Is that all?'

'Not in the least, but one mouthful at a time, I always say.'

'No you don't. Shurq Elalle is the one always saying that.'

'Your penchant for disgusting images, Master, is as ever poorly timed and thoroughly inappropriate. Now, about that pithy solution of yours . . .'

'Well, I admit to disappointment. You didn't even mention my grand scheme to bankrupt the empire.'

'The Invigilator now hunts for you in earnest.'

'Karos Invictad? No wonder you put me under a shroud. I shall endeavour to be close to the roof 's edge the day he clambers into view with his drooling henchmen, so that I can fling myself over the side, which, you'll agree, is far preferable to even one bell's worth of his infamous, ghastly inquisition. In the meantime, what's for supper?'

'Vinik eggs – I found a somewhat broken nest washed up under a dock.'

'But vinik eggs are poisonous, hence the clouds of complaining gulls constantly circling over every nasty little floating island.'

'It's a matter of proper cooking, Master, and the addition of a few essential herbs that serve to negate most of the ill effects.'

'Most?'

'Yes.'

'And do you have in your possession those life-sustaining herbs?'

'Well, no, but I thought I'd improvise.'

'There you have it.'

'There I have what, Master?'

'Why, my pithy reply, of course.'

Bugg squinted at Tehol Beddict, who winked, this time closing his brown eye. The Elder God scowled, then said, 'Thank you, Master. What would I ever do without you?'

'Scant little, I'd wager.'

* * *

Tanal Yathvanar set the package down on the Invigilator's desk. 'Delivered by a rat-faced urchin this morning. Sir, I expect it will prove no particular challenge. In any case,' he continued as he began unwrapping the package, 'I was instructed to treat it delicately, and to keep it upright. And you will, in moments, see why.'

Karos Invictad watched with heavy-lidded eyes as the grease-stained, poor quality ragweed wrapping was delicately pulled away, revealing a small, open-topped wooden box that seemed to possess layered sides. The Invigilator leaned forward to peer inside.

And saw a two-headed insect, such as were now appearing down by the river. Its legs were moving precisely, carrying it round . . . and round. The

insides of the box were each of coloured, polished tiles, and it appeared that the tiles could be slid free, or rearranged, if one so chose.

'What were the instructions, Tanal?'

'The challenge is to halt the insect's motion. It will, apparently, continue walking in a circle, in the same place, until it dies of starvation – which, incidentally, is the fail point for the puzzle . . . approximately four months. While the creature rotates in place, it will not eat. As for water, a small clump of soaked moss will suffice. As you can see, the tiles on the inside can be rearranged, and presumably, once the proper order or sequence is discovered, the insect will stop. And you will have defeated the puzzle. The restrictions are these: no object may be placed inside the container; nor can you physically touch or make contact with the insect.'

Karos Invictad grunted. 'Seems direct enough. What is the record for the solution?'

'There is none. You are the first and only player, apparently.'

'Indeed. Curious. Tanal, three prisoners died in their cells last night – some contagion is loose down there. Have the corpses burned in the Receiving Ground west of the city. Thoroughly. And have the rest washed down with disinfectant.'

'At once, Invigilator.'

*The ruins were far more extensive than is commonly imagined. In fact, most historians of the early period of the colony have paid little or no attention to the reports of the Royal Engineer, specifically those of Keden Qan, who served from the founding until the sixth decade. During the formulation of the settlement building plan, a most thorough survey was conducted. The three extant Jhag towers behind the Old Palace were in fact part of a far larger complex, which of course runs contrary to what is known of Jhag civilization. For this reason, it may be safe to assume that the Jhag complex on the bank of the Lether River represents a pre-dispersion site. That is, before the culture disintegrated in its sudden, violent diaspora. An alternative interpretation would be that the three main towers, four*

*subterranean vaults, and what Qan called the Lined Moat all belonged to a single, unusually loyal family.*

*In either case, the point I am making here is this: beyond the Jhag – or more correctly, Jaghut – complex, there were other ruins. Of course, one need not point out the most obvious and still existing Azath structure – that lecture will have to wait another day. Rather, in an area covering almost the entire expanse of present-day Letheras could be found foundation walls, plazas or concourses, shaped wells, drainage ditches and, indeed, some form of cemetery or mortuary, and – listen carefully now – all of it not of human design. Nor Jaghut, nor even Tarthenal.*

*Now, what were the details of this unknown complex? Well, for one, it was self-contained, walled, entirely covered by multilevel roofing – even the plazas, alleys and streets. As a fortress, it was virtually impregnable. Beneath the intricately paved floors and streets, there was a second even more defensible city, the corridors and tunnels of which can now be found as an integral part of our sewer outflow.*

*In short, Letheras, the colony of the First Empire, was founded upon the ruins of an earlier city, one whose layout seemed to disregard the presence of the Jaghut towers and the Azath, suggesting that it pre-dates both.*

*Even the first engineer, Keden Qan, was unable or unwilling to attempt an identification of these early builders. Virtually no artifacts were found – no potsherds, no sculptures, no remnants of metal-working. One last interesting detail. It appeared that in the final stages of occupation, the dwellers set about frantic alterations to their city. Qan's analysis of these efforts led him to conclude that a catastrophic climate change had occurred, for the efforts indicated a desperate attempt to add insulation.*

*Presumably, that effort failed—*

Her interior monologue ceased abruptly as she heard the faint scuff of someone approaching. Lifting her head was a struggle, but Janath Anar managed, just as the chamber's heavy door creaked open and light flooded in from a lantern – dull and low yet blinding her nonetheless.

Tanal Yathvanar stepped into view – it would be none other but him, she knew – and a moment later he spoke. 'I pray you've yet to drive yourself mad.'

Through cracked, blistered lips, she smiled, then said in a croaking voice, 'Lectures. I am halfway into the term. Early history. Mad? Oh yes, without question.'

She heard him come closer. 'I have been gone from you too long – you are suffering. That was careless of me.'

'Careless is keeping me alive, you miserable little wretch,' she said.

'Ah, perhaps I deserved that. Come, you must drink.'

'What if I refuse?'

'Then, with your inevitable death, you are defeated. By me. Are you sure you want that, Scholar?'

'You urge me to stubborn resistance. I understand. The sadist needs his victim alive, after all. For as long as humanly possible.'

'Dehydration is a most unpleasant way to die, Janath Anar.'

He lifted the spigot of a waterskin to her mouth. She drank.

'Not too quickly,' Tanal said, stepping back. 'You will just make yourself sick. Which wouldn't, I see, be the first time for you.'

'When you see maggots crawl out of your own wastes, Yathvanar . . . Next time,' she added, 'take your damned candle with you.'

'If I do that,' he replied, 'you will go blind—'

'And that matters?'

He stepped close once again and poured more water into her mouth.

Then he set about washing her down. Sores had opened where stomach fluids had burned desiccated skin, and, he could see, she had been pulling on her bindings, seeking to squeeze her hands through the shackles. 'You

are looking much worse for wear,' he said as he dabbed ointment on the wounds. 'You cannot get your hands through, Janath—'

'Panic cares nothing for what can and can't be done, Tanal Yathvanar. One day you will discover that. There was a priest once, in the second century, who created a cult founded on the premise that every victim tallied in one's mortal life awaits that one beyond death. From the slightest of wounds to the most grievous, every victim preceding you into death . . . *waits*. For you.

'A mortal conducts spiritual economics in his or her life, amassing credit and debt. Tell me, Patriotist, how indebted are you by now? How vast the imbalance between good deeds and your endless acts of malice?'

'A bizarre, insane cult,' he muttered, moving away. 'No wonder it failed.'

'In this empire, yes, it's no wonder at all. The priest was set upon in the street and torn limb from limb. Still, it's said adherents remain, among the defeated peoples – the Tarthenal, the Fent and Nerek, the victims, as it were, of Letherii cruelty – and before those people virtually disappeared from the city, there were rumours that the cult was reviving.'

Tanal Yathvanar sneered. 'The ones who fail ever need a crutch, a justification – they fashion virtue out of misery. Karos Invictad has identified that weakness, in one of his treatises—'

Janath's laugh broke into ragged coughing. When she recovered, she spat and said, 'Karos Invictad. Do you know why he so despises academics? He is a failed one himself.' She bared her stained teeth. 'He calls them treatises, does he? Errant fend, how pathetic. Karos Invictad couldn't fashion a decent argument, much less a treatise.'

'You are wrong in that, woman,' Tanal said. 'He has even explained why he did so poorly as a young scholar – oh yes, he would not refute your assessment of his career as a student. Driven by emotions, back then. Incapable of a cogent position, leaving him rife with anger – but at himself, at his own failings. But, years later, he learned that all emotion had to be scoured from him; only then would his inner vision become clear.'

'Ah, he needed wounding, then. What was it? A betrayal of sorts, I expect. Some woman? A protégé, a patron? Does it even matter? Karos Invictad makes sense to me, now. Why he is what he has become.' She laughed again, this time without coughing, then said, 'Delicious irony. Karos Invictad became a *victim*.'

'Don't be—'

'A victim, Yathvanar! And he didn't like it, oh no, not at all. It hurt – the world hurt him, so now he's hurting it back. And yet, he has still to even the score. But you see, he never will, because in his mind, he's still that victim, still lashing out. And as you said earlier, the victim and his crutch, his virtue of misery – one feeds the other, without cessation. No wonder he bridles with self-righteousness for all his claims to emotionless intellect—'

He struck her, hard, her head snapping to one side, spittle and blood threading out.

Breathing fast, chest strangely tight, Tanal hissed, 'Rail at me all you will, Scholar. I expect that. But not at Karos Invictad. He is the empire's last true hope. Only Karos Invictad will guide us into glory, into a new age, an age without the Edur, without the mixed-bloods, without even the failed peoples. No, just the Letherii, an empire expanding outward with sword and fire, all the way back to the homeland of the First Empire. He has seen our future! Our destiny!'

She stared at him in the dull light. 'Of course. But first, he needs to kill every Letherii worthy of the name. Karos Invictad, the Great Scholar, and his empire of thugs—'

He struck her again, harder than before, then lurched back, raising his hand – it was trembling, skin torn and battered, a shard of one broken tooth jutting from one knuckle.

She was unconscious.

*Well, she asked for it. She wouldn't stop. That means she wanted it, deep inside, she wanted me to beat her. I've heard about this – Karos has told me – they come to like it, eventually. They like the . . . attention.*

*So, I must not neglect her. Not again. Plenty of water, keep her clean and fed.*

*And beat her anyway.*

But she was not unconscious, for she then spoke in a mumble. He could not make it out and edged closer.

'. . . on the other side . . . I will wait for you . . . on the other side . . .'

Tanal Yathvanar felt a slither deep in his gut. And fled from it. *No god waits to pass judgement. No-one marks the imbalance of deeds – no god is beyond its own imbalances – for its own deeds are as subject to judgement as any other. So who then fashions this afterlife? Some natural imposition? Ridiculous – there is no balance in nature. Besides, nature exists in this world and this world alone – its rules mean nothing once the bridge is crossed . . .*

Tanal Yathvanar found himself walking up the corridor, that horrid woman and her cell far behind him now – he had no recollection of actually leaving.

*Karos has said again and again, justice is a conceit. It does not exist in nature. 'Retribution seen in natural catastrophes is manufactured by all too eager and all too pious people, each one convinced the world will end but spare them and them alone. But we all know, the world is inherited by the obnoxious, not the righteous.'*

*Unless,* came the thought in Janath's voice, *the two are one and the same*.

He snarled as he hurried up the worn stone stairs. She was far below. Chained. A prisoner in her solitary cell.

There was no escape for her.

*I have left her down there, far below. Far behind. She can't escape.*

Yet, in his mind, he heard her laughter.

And was no longer so sure.

Two entire wings of the Eternal Domicile were empty, long, vacated corridors and never-occupied chambers, storage rooms, administration vaults, servant quarters and kitchens. Guards patrolling these sections once a day carried their own lanterns, and left unrelieved darkness in their wake. In the growing damp of these unoccupied places, dust had become mould, mould had become rot, and the rot in turn leaked rank fluids that ran down plastered walls and pooled in dips in the floors.

Abandonment and neglect would soon defeat the ingenious innovations of Bugg's Construction, as they defeated most things raised by hands out of the earth, and Turudal Brizad, the Errant, considered himself almost unique in his fullest recognition of such sordid truths. Indeed, there were other elders persisting in their nominal existence, but they one and all fought still against the ravages of inevitable dissolution. Whereas the Errant could not be bothered.

Most of the time.

The Jaghut had come to comprehend the nature of futility, inspiring the Errant to a certain modicum of empathy for those most tragic of people. Where was Gothos now, he wondered. Probably long dead, all things considered. He had written a multiple-volumed suicide note – his *Folly* – that presumably concluded at some point, although the Errant had neither seen nor heard that such a conclusion existed. Perhaps, he considered with sudden suspicion, there was some hidden message in a suicidal testimonial without end, but if so, such meaning was too obscure for the mind of anyone but a Jaghut.

He had followed the Warlock King to the dead Azath, remained there long enough to discern Hannan Mosag's intentions, and had now returned to the Eternal Domicile, where he could walk these empty corridors in peace. Contemplating, among other things, stepping once again into the fray. To battle, one more time, the ravages of dissolution.

He thought he could hear Gothos laughing, somewhere. But no doubt that was only his imagination, ever eager to mock his carefully reasoned impulses.

Finding himself in a stretch of corridor awash with slime-laden water, the Errant paused. 'Well,' he said with a soft sigh, 'to bring a journey to a close, one must first begin it. Best I act whilst the will remains.'

His next step took him into a glade, thick verdant grasses underfoot, a ring of dazzling flowers at the very edges of the black-boled trees encircling the clearing. Butterflies danced from one bloom of colour to the next. The patch of sky visible overhead was faintly tinted vermilion and the air seemed strangely thin.

A voice spoke behind him. 'I do not welcome company here.'

The Errant turned. He slowly cocked his head. 'It's not often the sight of a woman inspires fear in my soul.'

She scowled. 'Am I that ugly, Elder?'

'To the contrary, Menandore. Rather . . . formidable.'

'You have trespassed into my place of refuge.' She paused, then asked, 'Does it so surprise you, that one such as myself needs refuge?'

'I do not know how to answer that,' he replied.

'You're a careful one, Errant.'

'I suspect you want a reason to kill me.'

She walked past him, long black sarong flowing from frayed ends and ragged tears. 'Abyss below,' she murmured, 'am I so transparent? Who but you could have guessed that I require justification for killing?'

'So your sense of sarcasm has survived your solitude, Menandore. It is what I am ever accused of, isn't it? My . . . random acts.'

'Oh, I know they're not random. They only seem that way. You delight in tragic failure, which leads me to wonder what you want with me? We are not well suited, you and I.'

'What have you been up to lately?' he asked.

'Why should I tell you?'

'Because I have information to impart, which you will find . . . *well suited* to your nature. And I seek recompense.'

'If I deny it you will have made this fraught journey for nothing.'

'It will only be fraught if you attempt something untoward, Menandore.'

'Precisely.'

Her unhuman eyes regarded him steadily.

He waited.

'Sky keeps,' she said.

'Ah, I see. Has it begun, then?'

'No, but soon.'

'Well, you are not one to act without long preparation, so I am not that surprised. And which side will we, eventually, find you on, Menandore?'

'Why, mine of course.'

'You will be opposed.'

One thin brow arched.

The Errant glanced around. 'A pleasant place. What warren are we in?'

'You would not believe me if I told you.'

'Ah,' he nodded, '*that* one. Very well, your sisters conspire.'

'Not against me, Errant.'

'Not directly, or, rather, not immediately. Rest assured, however, that the severing of your head from your shoulders is the eventual goal.'

'Has she been freed, then?'

'Imminent.'

'And you will do nothing? What of the others in that fell city?'

*Others?* 'Mael is being . . . Mael. Who else hides in Letheras, barring your two sisters?'

'Sisters,' she said, then sneered as she turned away, walked to one edge of the glade, where she crouched and plucked a flower. Facing him once more, she lifted the flower to draw deep its scent.

From the snapped stem, thick red blood dripped steadily.

*I've indeed heard it said that beauty is the thinnest skin.*

She suddenly smiled. 'Why, no-one. I misspoke.'

'You invite me to a frantic and no doubt time-devouring search to prove your ingenuousness, Menandore. What possible reason could you have to set me on such a trail?'

She shrugged. 'Serves you right for infringing upon my place of refuge, Errant. Are we done here?'

'Your flower is bled out,' he said, as he stepped back, and found himself once more in the empty, flooded corridor of the Eternal Domicile's fifth wing.

*Others. The bitch.*

As soon as the Errant vanished from the glade, Menandore flung the wilted flower to one side, and two figures emerged from the forest, one from her left, the other from her right.

Menandore arched her back as she ran both hands through her thick red hair.

Both figures paused to watch.

She had known they would. 'You heard?' she asked, not caring which one answered.

Neither did. Menandore dropped her pose and scowled over to the scrawny, shadow-swarmed god to her left. 'That cane is an absurd affectation, you know.'

'Never mind my absurd affectations, woman. Blood dripping from a flower, for Hood's sake – oops—' The god known as Shadowthrone tilted a head towards the tall, cowled figure opposite. 'Humblest apologies, Reaper.'

Hood, Lord of Death, seemed to cock his head as if surprised. 'Yours?'

'Apologies? Naturally not. I but made a declarative statement. Was there a subject attached to it? No. We three fell creatures have met, have spoken, have agreed on scant little, and have concluded that our previous impressions of each other proved far too . . . generous. Nonetheless, it seems we are agreed, more or less, on the one matter you, Hood, wanted to address. It's no wonder you're so ecstatic.'

Menandore frowned at the Lord of Death, seeking evidence of ecstasy. Finding none, she eyed Shadowthrone once more. 'Know that I have never accepted your claim.'

'I'm crushed. So your sisters are after you. What a dreadful family you have. Want help?'

'You too? Recall my dismissal of the Errant.'

Shadowthrone shrugged. 'Elders think too slowly. My offer is of another magnitude. Think carefully before you reject it.'

'And what do you ask in return?'

'Use of a gate.'

'Which gate?'

Shadowthrone giggled, then the eerie sound abruptly stopped, and in a serious tone he said, 'Starvald Demelain.'

'To what end?'

'Why, providing you with assistance, of course.'

'You want my sisters out of the way, too – perhaps more than I do. Squirming on that throne of yours, are you?'

'Convenient convergence of desires, Menandore. Ask Hood about such things, especially now.'

'If I give you access to Starvald Demelain, you will use it more than once.'

'Not I.'

'Do you so vow?'

'Why not?'

'Foolish,' Hood said in a rasp.

'I hold you to that vow, Shadowthrone,' Menandore said.

'Then you accept my help?'

'As you do mine in this matter. Convergence of desires, you said.'

'You're right,' Shadowthrone said. 'I retract all notions of "help". We are mutually assisting one another, as fits said convergence; and once finished with the task at hand, no other obligations exist between us.'

'That is agreeable.'

'You two,' Hood said, turning away, 'are worse than advocates. And you don't want to know what I do with the souls of advocates.' A heartbeat later and the Lord of Death was gone.

Menandore frowned. 'Shadowthrone, what are advocates?'

'A profession devoted to the subversion of laws for profit,' he replied, his cane inexplicably tapping as he shuffled back into the woods. 'When I was Emperor, I considered butchering them all.'

'So why didn't you?' she asked as he began to fade into a miasma of gloom beneath the trees.

Faintly came the reply, 'The Royal Advocate said it'd be a terrible mistake.'

Menandore was alone once again. She looked around, then grunted. 'Gods, I hate this place.' A moment later she too vanished.

Janall, once Empress of the Lether Empire, was now barely recognizable as a human. Brutally used as a conduit of the chaotic power of the Crippled God, her body had been twisted into a malign nightmare, bones bent, muscles stretched and bunched, and now, huge bulges of fat hung in folds from her malformed body. She could not walk, could not even lift her left arm, and the sorcery had broken her mind, the madness burning from eyes that glittered malevolently in the gloom as Nisall, carrying a lantern, paused in the doorway.

The chamber was rank with sweat, urine and other suppurations from the countless oozing sores on Janall's skin; the sweet reek of spoiled food, and another odour, pungent, that reminded the Emperor's Concubine of rotting teeth.

Janall dragged herself forward with a strange, asymmetrical shift of her hips, pivoting on her right arm. The motion made a sodden sound beneath her, and Nisall saw the streams of saliva easing out from the once-beautiful woman's misshapen mouth. The floor was pooled in the mucus and it was this, she realized, that was the source of the pungent smell.

Fighting back nausea, the Concubine stepped forward. 'Empress.'

'No longer!' The voice was ragged, squeezed out from a deformed throat, and drool spattered with every jerk of her misshapen jaw. 'I am Queen! Of his House, his honeyed House – oh, we are a contented family, oh yes, and one day, one day soon, you'll see, that pup on the throne will come here. For me, his Queen. You, whore, you're nothing – the House is not for you. You blind Rhulad to the truth, but his vision will clear, once,' her voice dropped to a whisper and she leaned forward, 'we are rid of you.'

'I came,' Nisall said, 'to see if you needed anything—'

'Liar. You came in search of allies. You think to steal him away. From me. From our true master. You will fail! Where's my son? Where is he?'

Nisall shook her head. 'I don't know. I don't even know if he's still alive – there are those in the court who claim he is, whilst others tell me he is long dead. But, Empress, I will seek to find out. And when I do, I will return. With the truth.'

'I don't believe you. You were never my ally. You were Ezgara's whore, not mine.'

'Has Turudal Brizad visited you, Empress?'

For a moment it seemed she would not answer. Then she managed something like a shrug. 'He does not dare. Master sees through my eyes – tell Rhulad that, and he will understand what must be. Through my eyes – look closer, if you would know a god. The god. The only god that matters now. The rest of them are blind, as blind as you've made Rhulad, but they're all in for a surprise, oh yes. The House is big – bigger than you imagine. The House is all of us, whore, and one day that truth will be proclaimed, so that all will hear. See me? I am on my knees, and that is no accident. Every human shall be on their knees, one day, and they will know me for their Queen. As for the King in Chains,' she laughed, a sound thick with phlegm, 'well, the crown is indifferent to whose skull it binds. The pup is failing, you know. Failing. There is . . . dissatisfaction. I should kill you, now, here. Come closer, whore.'

Instead, Nisall backed away a step, then two, until she was once more in the doorway. 'Empress, the Chancellor is the source of Rhulad's . . . failings. Your god should know that, lest it make a mistake. If you would kill anyone, it should be Triban Gnol, and, perhaps, Karos Invictad – they plot to usurp the Edur.'

'The Edur?' She spat. 'Master's almost done with them. Almost done.'

'I will send servants down,' Nisall said. 'To clean your chamber, Empress.'

'Spies.'

'No, from your own entourage.'

'Turned.'

'Empress, they will take care of you, for their loyalty remains.'

'But I don't want them!' Janall hunched lower. 'I don't want them . . . to see me like this.'

'A bed will be sent down. Canopied. You can draw the shroud when they arrive. Pass out the soiled bedding through a part in the curtain.'

'You would do this? I wanted you dead.'

'The past is nothing,' Nisall said. 'Not any more.'

'Get out,' Janall rasped, looking away. 'Master is disgusted with you. Suffering is our natural state. A truth to proclaim, and so I shall, when I win my new throne. Get out, whore, or come closer.'

'Expect your servants within the bell,' Nisall said, turning and walking from the grisly chamber.

As the echo of the whore's footsteps faded, Janall, Queen of the House of Chains, curled up into a ball on the slick, befouled floor. Madness flickered in her eyes, there, then gone, then there once more. Over and over again. She spoke, one voice thick, the other rasping.

'Vulnerable.'

'Until the final war. Watch the army, as it pivots round, entirely round. These sordid games here, the times are almost past, past us all. Oh, when the pain at last ends, then you shall see the truth of me. Dear Queen, my power was once the sweetest kiss. A love that broke nothing.'

'Give me my throne. You promised.'

'Is it worth it?'

'I beg you—'

'They all beg me, and call it prayer. What sour benediction must I swallow from this eternal fount of dread and spite and bald greed? Will you never see? Never understand? I must find the broken ones, just do not expect my reach, my touch. No-one understands, how the gods fear freedom. No-one.'

'You have lied to me.'

'You have lied to yourself. You all do, and call it faith. I am your god. I am what you made me. You all decry my indifference, but I assure you, you would greater decry my attention. No, make no proclamations otherwise. I

know what you claim to do in my name. I know your greatest fear is that I will one day call you on it – and that is the real game here, this knuckles of the soul. Watch me, mortal, watch me call you on it. Every one of you.'

'My god is mad.'

'As you would have me, so I am.'

'I want my throne.'

'You always want.'

'Why won't you give it to me?'

'I answer as a god: if I give you what you want, we all die. Hah, I know – *you don't care!* Oh, you humans, you are something else. You make my every breath agony. And my every convulsion is your ecstasy. Very well, mortal, I will answer your prayers. I promise. Just do not ever say I didn't warn you. Do not. *Ever*.'

Janall laughed, spraying spit. 'We are mad,' she whispered. 'Oh yes, quite mad. And we're climbing into the light . . .'

For all the scurrying servants and the motionless, helmed guards at various entrances, Nisall found the more populated areas of the Eternal Domicile in some ways more depressing than the abandoned corridors she'd left behind a third of a bell past. Suspicion soured the air, fear stalked like shadows underfoot between the stanchions of torchlight. The palace's name had acquired a taint of irony, rife as the Eternal Domicile was with paranoia, intrigue and incipient betrayal. As if humans could manage no better, and were doomed to such sordid existence for all time.

Clearly, there was nothing satisfying in peace, beyond the freedom it provided to get up to no good. She had been shaken by her visit to the supposedly insane once-empress, Janall. This Crippled God indeed lurked in the woman's eyes – Nisall had seen it, felt that chilling, unhuman attention fixing on her, calculating, pondering her potential use. She did not want to be part of a god's plans, especially that god's. Even more frightening, Janall's ambitions remained, engorged with visions of supreme

power, her tortured, brutalized body notwithstanding. The god was using her as well.

There were rumours of war hissing like wind in the palace, tales of a belligerent conspiracy of border kingdoms and tribes to the east. The Chancellor's reports to Rhulad had been anything but simple in their exhortations to raise the stakes. A formal declaration of war, the marching of massed troops over the borders in a pre-emptive campaign of conquest. Far better to spill blood on their lands than on Letherii soil, after all. '*If the Bolkando-led alliance wants war, we should give it to them*.' The Chancellor's glittering eyes belied the cool, almost toneless enunciation of those words.

Rhulad had fidgeted on his throne, muttering his unease – the Edur were too spread out, the K'risnan were overworked. Why did the Bolkandans so dislike him? There had been no list of grievances. He had done nothing to spark this fire to life.

Triban Gnol had pointed out, quietly, that four agents of the conspiracy had been captured entering Letheras only the other day. Disguised as merchants seeking ivory. Karos Invictad had sent by courier their confessions and would the Emperor like to see them?

Shaking his head in denial, Rhulad had said nothing, his pain-racked eyes fixed on the tiles of the dais beyond his slippered feet.

So lost, this terrible Emperor.

As she turned onto the corridor leading to her private chambers, she saw a tall figure standing near her door. A Tiste Edur, one of the few who were resident in the palace. She vaguely recalled the warrior's having something to do with security.

He tilted his head in greeting as she approached. 'First Concubine Nisall.'

'Has the Emperor sent you?' she asked, stepping past and waving him behind her into the chambers. Few men could intimidate her – she knew too well their minds. She was less at ease in the company of women, and the virtually neutered men such as Triban Gnol.

'Alas,' the warrior said, 'I am not permitted to speak to my Emperor.'

She paused and glanced back at him. 'Are you out of favour?'

'I have no idea.'

Intrigued now, Nisall regarded the Edur for a moment, then asked, 'Would you like some wine?'

'No, thank you. Were you aware that a directive has been issued by Invigilator Karos Invictad to compile evidence leading to your arrest for sedition?'

She grew very still. Sudden heat flashed through her, then she felt cold, beads of sweat like ice against her skin. 'Are you here,' she whispered, 'to arrest me?'

His brows rose. 'No, nothing of the sort. The very opposite, in fact.'

'You wish, then, to join in my treason?'

'First Concubine, I do not believe you are engaged in any seditious acts. And if you are, I doubt they are directed against Emperor Rhulad.'

She frowned. 'If not the Emperor, then whom? And how could it be considered treasonous if they are not aimed at Rhulad? Do you think I resent the Tiste Edur hegemony? Precisely whom am I conspiring against?'

'If I was forced to hazard a guess . . . Chancellor Triban Gnol.'

She said nothing for a moment, then, 'What do you want?'

'Forgive me. My name is Bruthen Trana. I was appointed to oversee the operations of the Patriotists, although it is likely that the Emperor has since forgotten that detail.'

'I am not surprised. You've yet to report to him.'

He grimaced. 'True. The Chancellor has made certain of that.'

'He insists you report to *him* instead, yes? I'm beginning to understand, Bruthen Trana.'

'Presumably, Triban Gnol's assurances that he has conveyed said reports to Rhulad are false.'

'The only reports the Emperor receives regarding the Patriotists are those from the Invigilator, as vetted through the Chancellor.'

He sighed. 'As I suspected. First Concubine, it is said your relationship with the Emperor has gone somewhat beyond that of ruler and chosen whore – forgive me for the use of that term. Rhulad is being isolated – from his own people. Daily he receives petitions, but they are all from Letherii, and those are carefully selected by Triban Gnol and his staff. This situation had worsened since the fleets sailed, for with them went Tomad Sengar and Uruth, and many other Hiroth, including Rhulad's brother, Binadas. All who might have effectively opposed the Chancellor's machinations were removed from the scene. Even Hanradi Khalag . . .' His words fell away and he stared at her, then shrugged. 'I must speak to the Emperor, Nisall. Privately.'

'I may not be able to help you, if I am to be arrested,' she said.

'Only Rhulad himself can prevent that from occurring,' Bruthen Trana said. 'In the meantime, I can afford you some protection.'

She cocked her head. 'How?'

'I will assign you two Edur bodyguards.'

'Ah, so you are not entirely alone, Bruthen.'

'The only Edur truly alone here is the Emperor. And, perhaps, Hannan Mosag, although he still has his K'risnan – but it is anything but certain that the once-Warlock King is loyal to Rhulad.'

Nisall smiled without much humour. 'And so it turns out,' she said, 'that the Tiste Edur are no different from the Letherii after all. Do you know, Rhulad would have it . . . otherwise.'

'Perhaps, then, First Concubine, we can work together to help him realize his vision.'

'Your bodyguards had best be subtle, Bruthen. The Chancellor's spies watch me constantly.'

The Edur smiled. 'Nisall, we are children of Shadow . . .'

Once, long ago, she had walked for a time through Hood's Realm. In the language of the Eleint, the warren that was neither new nor Elder was known as Festal'rythan, the Layers of the Dead. She had found proof of that when traversing the winding cut of a gorge, the raw walls of which revealed innumerable strata evincing the truth of extinction. Every species that ever existed was trapped in the sediments of Festal'rythan, not in the same manner of similar formations of geology as could be found in any world; no, in Hood's Realm, the soul sparks persisted, and what she was witness to was their 'lives', abandoned here, crushed into immobility. The stone itself was, in the peculiar oxymoron that plagued the language of death, *alive*.

In the broken grounds surrounding the lifeless Azath of Letheras, many of those long-extinct creatures had crawled back through the gate, as insidious as any vermin. True, it was not a gate as such, just . . . rents, fissures, as if some terrible demon had slashed from both sides, talons the size of two-handed swords tearing through the fabric between the warrens. There had been battles here, the spilling of ascendant blood, the uttering of vows that could not be kept. She could still smell the death of the Tarthenal gods, could almost hear their outrage and disbelief, as one fell, then another, and another . . . until all were gone, delivered unto Festal'rythan. She did not pity them. It was too easy to be arrogant upon arriving in this world, to think that none could challenge the unleashing of ancient power.

She had long since discovered a host of truths in time's irresistible progression. Raw became refined, and with refinement, power grew ever deadlier. All that was simple would, in time and under sufficient pressure – and if random chance proved benign rather than malignant – acquire greater complexity. And yet, at some point, a threshold was crossed, and complexity crumbled into dissolution. There was nothing fixed in this; some forms rose and fell with astonishing rapidity, while others could persist for extraordinarily long periods in seeming stasis.

Thus, she believed she comprehended more than most, yet found that she could do little with that knowledge. Standing in the overgrown, battered yard, her cold unhuman eyes fixed on the malformed shape squatting at the edge of the largest sundered barrow, she could see through to the chaos inside him, could see how it urged dissolution within that complex matrix of flesh, blood and bone. Pain radiated from his hunched, twisted back as she continued studying him.

He had grown aware of her presence, and fear whispered through him, the sorcery of the Crippled God building. Yet he was uncertain if she presented a threat. In the meantime, ambition rose and fell like crashing waves around the island of his soul.

She could, she decided, make use of this one.

'I am Hannan Mosag,' the figure said without turning. 'You . . . you are Soletaken. The cruellest of the Sisters, accursed among the Edur pantheon. Your heart is betrayal. I greet you, Sukul Ankhadu.'

She approached. 'Betrayal belongs to the one buried beneath, Hannan Mosag, to the Sister you once worshipped. How much, Edur, did that shape your destiny, I wonder? Any betrayals plaguing your people of late? Ah, I saw that flinch. Well, then, neither of us should be surprised.'

'You work to free her.'

'I always worked better with Sheltatha Lore than I did with Menandore . . . although that may not be the case now. The buried one has her . . . obsessions.'

The Tiste Edur grunted. 'Don't we all.'

'How long have you known your most cherished protectress was entombed here?'

'Suspicions. For years. I had thought – hoped – that I would discover what remained of Scabandari Bloodeye here as well.'

'Wrong ascendant,' Sukul Ankhadu said, her tone droll. 'Had you got it right as to who betrayed whom back then, you would have known that.'

'I hear the contempt in your voice.'

'Why are you here? So impatient as to add your power to the rituals I unleashed below?'

'It may be,' Hannan Mosag said, 'that we could work together . . . for a time.'

'What would be the value in that?'

The Tiste Edur shifted to look up at her. 'It seems obvious. Even now, Silchas Ruin hunts for the one I'd thought here. I doubt that either you or Sheltatha Lore would be pleased should he succeed. I can guide you onto his trail. I can also lend you . . . support, at the moment of confrontation.'

'And in return?'

'For one, we can see an end to your killing and eating citizens in the city. For another, we can destroy Silchas Ruin.'

She grunted. 'I have heard that determination voiced before, Hannan Mosag. Is the Crippled God truly prepared to challenge him?'

'With allies . . . yes.'

She considered his proposal. There would be treachery, but it would probably not occur until after Ruin was disposed of – the game would turn over the disposition of the Finnest. She well knew that Scabandari Bloodeye's power was not as it once was, and what remained would be profoundly vulnerable. 'Tell me, does Silchas Ruin travel alone?'

'No. He has a handful of followers, but of them, only one is cause for concern. A Tiste Edur, the eldest brother of the Sengar, once commander of the Edur Warriors.'

'A surprising alliance.'

'Shaky is a better way of describing it. He too seeks the Finnest, and will, I believe, do all he can to prevent its falling into Ruin's hands.'

'Ah, expedience plagues us all.' Sukul Ankhadu smiled. 'Very well, Hannan Mosag. We are agreed, but tell your Crippled God this: fleeing at

the moment of attack, abandoning Sheltatha Lore and myself to Silchas Ruin and, say, making off with the Finnest during the fight, will prove a fatal error. With our dying breaths, we will tell Silchas Ruin all he needs to know, and he will come after the Crippled God, and he will not relent.'

'You will not be abandoned, Sukul Ankhadu. As for the Finnest itself, do you wish to claim it for yourselves?'

She laughed. 'To fight over it between us? No, we'd rather see it destroyed.'

'I see. Would you object, then, to the Crippled God's making use of its power?'

'Will such use achieve eventual destruction?'

'Oh yes, Sukul Ankhadu.'

She shrugged. 'As you like.' *You must truly think me a fool, Hannan Mosag.* 'Your god marches to war – he will need all the help he can get.'

Hannan Mosag managed his own smile, a twisted, feral thing. 'He is incapable of marching. He does not even crawl. The war comes to him, Sister.'

If there was hidden significance to that distinction, Sukul Ankhadu was unable to discern it. Her gaze lifted, fixed on the river to the south. Wheeling gulls, strange islands of sticks and grasses spinning on the currents. And, she could sense, beneath the swirling surface, enormous, belligerent leviathans, using the islands as bait. Whatever came close enough . . .

She was drawn to a rumble of power from the broken barrow and looked down once more. 'She's coming, Hannan Mosag.'

'Shall I leave? Or will she be amenable to our arrangement?'

'On that, Edur, I cannot speak for her. Best you depart – she will, after all, be very hungry. Besides, she and I have much to discuss . . . old wounds to mend between us.'

She watched as the malformed warlock dragged himself away. *After all, you are much more her child than you are mine, and I'd rather she was, for the moment, without allies.*

*It was all Menandore's doing, anyway.*

# CHAPTER SIX

The argument was this: a civilization shackled to the strictures of excessive control on its populace, from choice of religion through to the production of goods, will sap the will and the ingenuity of its people – for whom such qualities are no longer given sufficient incentive or reward. At face value, this is accurate enough. Trouble arrives when the opponents to such a system institute its extreme opposite, where individualism becomes godlike and sacrosanct, and no greater service to any other ideal (including community) is possible. In such a system rapacious greed thrives behind the guise of freedom, and the worst aspects of human nature come to the fore, a kind of intransigence as fierce and nonsensical as its maternalistic counterpart.

And so, in the clash of these two extreme systems, one is witness to brute stupidity and blood-splashed insensitivity; two belligerent faces glowering at each other across the unfathomed distance, and yet, in deed and in fanatic regard, they are but mirror reflections.

This would be amusing if it weren't so pathetically idiotic . . .

*In Defence of Compassion*
Denabaris of Letheras, 4th century

Dead pirates were better, Shurq Elalle mused. There was a twisted sort of justice in the dead preying upon the living, especially when it came to stealing all their treasured possessions. Her pleasure in prying those ultimately worthless objects from their hands was the sole reason for her criminal activities, more than sufficient incentive to maintain her new-found profession. Besides, she was good at it.

The hold of the *Undying Gratitude* was filled with the cargo from the abandoned Edur ship, the winds were fresh and steady, pushing them hard north out of the Draconean Sea, and it looked as if the huge fleet in her wake was not getting any closer.

Edur and Letherii ships, a hundred, maybe more. They'd come out of the southwest, driving at a converging angle towards the sea lane that led to the mouth of the Lether River. The same lane that Shurq Elalle's ship now tracked, as well as two merchant scows the *Undying Gratitude* was fast overhauling. And that last detail was too bad, since those Pilott scows were ripe targets, and without a mass of Imperial ships crawling up her behind, she'd have pounced.

Cursing, Skorgen Kaban limped up to where she stood at the aft rail. 'It's that infernal search, ain't it? The two main fleets, or what's left of 'em.' The first mate leaned over the rail and spat down into the churning foam skirling out from the keel. 'They're gonna be nipping our tails all the way into Letheras harbour.'

'That's right, Pretty, which means we have to stay nice.'

'Aye. Nothing more tragic than staying nice.'

'We'll get over it,' Shurq Elalle said. 'Once we're in the harbour, we can sell what we got, hopefully before the fleet arrives to do the same – because then the price will drop, mark my words. Then we head back out. There'll be more Pilott scows, Skorgen.'

'You don't think that fleet came up on the floating wreck, do you? They've got every stretch of canvas out, like maybe they was chasing us. We get to the mouth and we're trapped, Captain.'

'Well, you have a point there. If they were truly scattered by that storm, a few of them could have come up on the wreck before it went under.' She thought for a time, then said, 'Tell you what. We'll sail past the mouth. And if they ignore us and head upriver, we can come round and follow them in. But that means they'll offload before we will, which means we won't make as much—'

'Unless their haul ain't going to market,' the first mate cut in. 'Could be it's all to replenish the royal vaults, Captain, or maybe it goes to the Edur and nobody else. Blood and Kagenza, after all. We could always find a coastal port and do our selling there.'

'You get wiser with every body part you lose, Pretty.'

He grunted. 'Gotta be some kind of upside.'

'That's the attitude,' she replied. 'All right, that's what we'll do, but never mind the coastal port – they're all dirt poor this far north, surrounded by nothing but wilderness and bad roads where the bandits line up to charge tolls. And if a few Edur galleys take after us, we can always scoot straight up to that hold-out prison isle this side of Fent Reach – that's a tight harbour mouth, or so I've been told, and they got a chain to keep the baddies out.'

'Pirates ain't baddies?'

'Not as far as they're concerned. The prisoners are running things now.'

'I doubt it'll be that easy,' Skorgen muttered. 'We'd just be bringing trouble down on them – it's not like the Edur couldn't have conquered them long ago. They just can't be bothered.'

'Maybe, maybe not. The point is, we'll run out of food and water if we can't resupply somewhere. Edur galleys are fast, fast enough to stay with us. Anywhere we dock they'll be on us before the last line is drawn to the bollard. With the exception of the prison isle.' She scowled. 'It's a damned shame. I wanted to go home for a bit.'

'Then we'd best hope the whole damned fleet back there heads upriver,' Skorgen the Pretty said, scratching round an eye socket.

'Hope and pray – you pray to any gods, Skorgen?'

'Sea spirits, mostly. The Face Under the Waves, the Guardian of the Drowned, the Swallower of Ships, the Stealer of Winds, the Tower of Water, the Reef Hiders, the—'

'All right, Pretty, that'll do. You can keep your host of disasters to yourself . . . just make sure you do all the propitiations.'

'Thought you didn't believe in all that, Captain.'

'I don't. But it never hurts to make sure.'

'One day their names will rise from the water, Captain,' Skorgen Kaban said, making a complicated warding gesture with his one remaining hand. 'And with them the seas will lift high, to claim the sky itself. And the world will vanish beneath the waves.'

'You and your damned prophecies.'

'Not mine. Fent. Ever see their early maps? They show a coast leagues out from what it is now. All their founding villages are under hundreds of spans of water.'

'So they believe their prophecy is coming true. Only it's going to take ten thousand years.'

His shrug was lopsided. 'Could be, Captain. Even the Edur claim that the ice far to the north is breaking up. Ten thousand years, or a hundred. Either way, we'll be long dead by then.'

*Speak for yourself, Pretty. Then again, what a thought. Me wandering round on the sea bottom for eternity.* 'Skorgen, get young Burdenar down from the crow's nest and into my cabin.'

The first mate made a face. 'Captain, you're wearing him out.'

'I ain't heard him complain.'

'Of course not. We'd all like to be as lucky – your pardon, Captain, for me being too forward, but it's true. I was serious, though. You're wearing him out, and he's the youngest sailor we got.'

'Right, meaning I'd probably kill the rest of you. Call him down, Pretty.'

'Aye, Captain.'

She stared back at the distant ships. The long search was over, it seemed. What would they be bringing back to fair Letheras, apart from casks of blood? *Champions. Each one convinced they can do what no other has ever*

*managed. Kill the Emperor. Kill him dead, deader than me, so dead he never gets back up.*

Too bad that would never happen.

On his way out of Letheras, Venitt Sathad, Indebted servant to Rautos Hivanar, halted the modest train outside the latest addition to the Hivanar holdings. The inn's refurbishment was well under way, he saw, as, accompanied by the owner of the construction company under hire, he made his way past the work crews crowding the main building, then out back to where the stables and other outbuildings stood.

Then stopped.

The structure that had been raised round the unknown ancient mechanism had been taken down. Venitt stared at the huge monolith of unknown metal, wondering why, now that it had been exposed, it looked so familiar. The edifice bent without a visible seam, three-quarters of the way up – at about one and a half times his own height – a seemingly perfect ninety degrees. The apex looked as if it awaited some kind of attachment, if the intricate loops of metal were anything more than decorative. The object stood on a platform of the same peculiar, dull metal, and again there was no obvious separation between it and the platform itself.

'Have you managed to identify its purpose?' Venitt asked the old, mostly bald man at his side.

'Well,' Bugg conceded, 'I have some theories.'

'I would be interested in hearing them.'

'You will find others in the city,' Bugg said. 'No two alike, but the same nonetheless, if you know what I mean.'

'No, I don't, Bugg.'

'Same manufacture, same mystery as to function. I've never bothered actually mapping them, but it may be that there is some kind of pattern, and from that pattern, the purpose of their existence might be comprehended. Possibly.'

'But who built them?'

'No idea, Venitt. Long ago, I suspect – the few others I've seen myself are mostly underground, and further out towards the river bank. Buried in silts.'

'In silts . . .' Venitt continued staring, then his eyes slowly widened. He turned to the old man. 'Bugg, I have a most important favour to ask of you. I must continue on my way, out of Letheras. I need a message delivered, however, back to my master. To Rautos Hivanar.'

Bugg shrugged. 'I see no difficulty managing that, Venitt.'

'Good. Thank you. The message is this: he must come here, to see this for himself. And – and this is most important – he must bring his collection of artifacts.'

'Artifacts?'

'He will understand, Bugg.'

'All right,' the old man said. 'I can get over there in a couple of days . . . or I can send a runner if you like.'

'Best in person, Bugg, if you would. If the runner garbles the message, my master might end up ignoring it.'

'As you like, Venitt. Where, may I ask, are you going?'

The Indebted scowled. 'Bluerose, and then on to Drene.'

'A long journey awaits you, Venitt. May it prove dull and uneventful.'

'Thank you, Bugg. How go things here?'

'We're waiting for another shipment of materials. When that arrives, we can finish up. Your master has pulled another of my crews over for that shoring-up project at his estate, but until the trusses arrive that's not as inconvenient as it might be.' He glanced at Venitt. 'Do you have any idea when Hivanar will be finished with all of that?'

'Strictly speaking, it's not shoring-up – although that is involved.' He paused, rubbed at his face. 'More of a scholarly pursuit. Master is extending

bulwarks out into the river, then draining and pumping the trenches clear so that the crews can dig down through the silts.'

Bugg frowned. 'Why? Is he planning to build a breakwater or a pier?'

'No. He is recovering . . . artifacts.'

Venitt watched the old man look back at the edifice, and saw the watery eyes narrow. 'I wouldn't mind seeing those.'

'Some of your foremen and engineers have done just that . . . but none were able to work out their function.' *And yes, they are linked to this thing here. In fact, one piece is a perfect replica of this, only on a much smaller scale.* 'When you deliver your message, you can ask to see what he's found, Bugg. I am sure he would welcome your observations.'

'Perhaps,' the old man said distractedly.

'Well,' Venitt said. 'I had best be going.'

'Errant ignore you, Venitt Sathad.'

'And you, Bugg.'

'If only . . .'

That last statement was little more than a whisper, and Venitt glanced back at Bugg as he crossed the courtyard on his way out. A peculiar thing to say.

But then, old men were prone to such eccentricities.

Dismounting, Atri-Preda Bivatt began walking among the wreckage. Vultures and crows clambered about from one bloated body to the next, as if confused by such a bounteous feast. Despite the efforts of the carrion eaters, it was clear to her that the nature of the slaughter was unusual. Huge blades, massive fangs and talons had done the damage to these hapless settlers, soldiers and drovers. And whatever had killed these people had struck before – the unit of cavalry that had pursued Redmask from Drene's North Gate had suffered an identical fate.

In her wake strode the Edur Overseer, Brohl Handar. 'There are demons,' he said, 'capable of this. Such as those the K'risnan conjured during the war . . . although they rarely use teeth and claws.'

Bivatt halted near a dead hearth. She pointed to a sweep of dirt beside it. 'Do your demons leave tracks such as these?'

The Edur warrior came to her side. 'No,' he said after a moment. 'This has the appearance of an oversized, flightless bird.'

'Oversized?' She glanced over at him, then resumed her walk.

Her soldiers were doing much the same, silent as they explored the devastated encampment. Outriders, still mounted, were circling the area, keeping to the ridge lines.

The rodara and myrid herds had been driven away, their tracks clearly visible heading east. The rodara herd had gone first, and the myrid had simply followed. It was possible, if the Letherii detachment rode hard, that they would catch up to the myrid. Bivatt suspected the raiders would not lag behind to tend to the slower-moving beasts.

'Well, Atri-Preda?' Brohl Handar asked from behind her. 'Do we pursue?'

She did not turn round. 'No.'

'The Factor will be severely displeased by your decision.'

'And that concerns you?'

'Not in the least.'

She said nothing. The Overseer was growing more confident in his appointment. More confident, or less cautious – there had been contempt in the Tiste Edur's tone. Of course, that he had chosen to accompany this expedition was evidence enough of his burgeoning independence. For all of that, she almost felt sorry for the warrior.

'If this Redmask is conjuring demons of some sort,' Brohl Handar continued, 'then we had best move in strength, accompanied by both Letherii and Edur mages. Accordingly, I concur with your decision.'

'It pleases me that you grasp the military implications of this, Overseer. Even so, in this instance even the desires of the Factor are of no importance to me. I am first and foremost an officer of the empire.'

'You are, and I am the Emperor's representative in this region. Thus.'

She nodded.

A few heartbeats later the Tiste Edur sighed. 'It grieves me to see so many slain children.'

'Overseer, we are no less thorough when slaying the Awl.'

'That, too, grieves me.'

'Such is war,' she said.

He grunted, then said, 'Atri-Preda, what is happening on these plains is not simply war. You Letherii have initiated a campaign of extermination. Had we Edur elected to cross that threshold, would you not have called us barbarians in truth? You do not hold the high ground in this conflict, no matter how you seek to justify your actions.'

'Overseer,' Bivatt said coldly, 'I care nothing about justifications, nor moral high ground. I have been a soldier too long to believe such things hold any sway over our actions. Whatever lies in our power to do, we do.' She gestured at the destroyed encampment around them. 'Citizens of Lether have been murdered. It is my responsibility to give answer to that, and so I shall.'

'And who will win?' Brohl Handar asked.

'We will, of course.'

'No, Atri-Preda. You will lose. As will the Awl. The victors are men such as Factor Letur Anict. Alas, such people as the Factor view you and your soldiers little differently from how they view their enemies. You are to be used, and this means that many of you will die. Letur Anict does not care. He needs you to win this victory, but beyond that his need for you ends . . . until a new enemy is found. Tell me, do empires exist solely to devour? Is there no value in peace? In order and prosperity and stability and security?

Are the only worthwhile rewards the stacks of coin in Letur Anict's treasury? He would have it so – all the rest is incidental and only useful if it serves him. Atri-Preda, you are in truth less than an Indebted. You are a slave – I am not wrong in this, for I am a Tiste Edur who possesses slaves. A slave, Bivatt, is how Letur Anict and his kind see you.'

'Tell me, Overseer, how would you fare without your slaves?'

'Poorly, no doubt.'

She turned about and walked back to her horse. 'Mount up. We're returning to Drene.'

'And these dead citizens of the empire? Do you leave their bodies to the vultures?'

'In a month even the bones will be gone,' Bivatt said, swinging onto her horse and gathering the reins. 'The whittle beetles will gnaw them all to dust. Besides, there is not enough soil to dig proper graves.'

'There are stones,' Brohl Handar noted.

'Covered in Awl glyphs. To use them would be to curse the dead.'

'Ah, so the enmity persists, so that even the ghosts war with each other. It is a dark world you inhabit, Atri-Preda.'

She looked down at him for a moment, then said, 'Are the shadows any better, Overseer?' When he made no reply, she said, 'On your horse, sir, if you please.'

The Ganetok encampment, swollen with the survivors of the Sevond and Niritha clans, sprawled across the entire valley. Beyond to the east loomed vast dun-hued clouds from the main herds in the next few valleys. The air was gritty with dust and the acrid smell of hearth fires. Small bands of warriors moved back and forth like gangs of thugs, weapons bristling, their voices loud.

Outriders had made contact with Redmask and his paltry tribe earlier in the day, yet had kept their distance, seemingly more interested in the substantial herd of rodara trailing the small group. An unexpected wealth

for so few Awl, leaving possession open to challenge, and it was clear to Redmask as he drew rein on a rise overlooking the encampment that word had preceded them, inciting countless warriors into bold challenge, one and all coveting rodara and eager to strip the beasts away from the mere handful of Renfayar warriors.

Alas, he would have to disappoint them. 'Masarch,' he now said, 'remain here with the others. Accept no challenges.'

'No-one has come close enough to see your mask,' the youth said. 'No-one suspects what you seek, War Leader. As soon as they do, we shall be under siege.'

'Do you fear, Masarch?'

'Dying? No, not any more.'

'Then you are a child no longer. Wait, do nothing.' Redmask nudged his horse onto the slope, gathering it into a collected canter as he approached the Ganetok encampment. Eyes fixed on him, then held, as shouts rose, the voices more angry than shocked. Until the nearer warriors made note of his weapons. All at once a hush fell over the encampment, rippling in a wave, and in its wake rose a murmuring, the anger he had first heard only now with a deeper timbre.

Dray dogs caught the burgeoning rage and drew closer, fangs bared and hackles stiff.

Redmask reined in. His Letherii horse tossed its head and stamped, snorting to warn off the huge dogs.

Someone was coming through the gathered crowd, like the prow of an unseen ship pushing through tall reeds. Settling back on the foreign saddle, Redmask waited.

Hadralt, firstborn son to Capalah, walked with his father's swagger but not his physical authority. He was short and lean, reputedly very fast with the hook-bladed shortswords cross-strapped beneath each arm. Surrounding him were a dozen of his favoured warriors, huge, hulking men whose faces had been painted in a simulacrum of scales, copper in tone yet clearly

intended to echo Redmask's own. The expressions beneath that paint were now ones of chagrin.

His hands restless around the fetishes lining his belt, Hadralt glowered up at Redmask. 'If you are who you claim to be, then you do not belong here. Leave, or your blood will feed the dry earth.'

Redmask let his impassive gaze slide over the copper-faced warriors. 'You mouth the echoes, yet quail from the source.' He looked once more upon the war leader. 'I am before you now, Hadralt son of Capalah. Redmask, war leader of the Renfayar clan, and on this day I will kill you.'

The dark eyes widened, then Hadralt sneered. 'Your life was a curse, Redmask. You have not yet earned the right to challenge me. Tell me, will your pathetically few pups fight for you? Your ambition will see them all killed, and my warriors shall take the Renfayar herds. And the Renfayar women – but only of bearing age. The children and elders will die, for they are burdens we will not abide. The Renfayar shall cease to be.'

'For your warriors to gain the right to challenge my kin, Hadralt, they must first defeat my own champions.'

'And where are they hiding, Redmask? Unless you mean that scarred dray that followed you in.'

The laughter at that jest was overloud.

Redmask glanced back at the lone beast. Lying on the ground just to the right of the horse, it had faced down all the other dogs in the area without even rising. The dray lifted its head and met Redmask's eyes, as if the animal not only comprehended the words that had been spoken, but also welcomed the opportunity to face every challenger. He felt something stir in his chest. 'This beast understands courage,' he said, facing Hadralt once more. 'Would that I had ten thousand warriors to match it. Yet all I see before me is you, Hadralt, war leader of ten thousand cowards.'

The clamour that erupted then seemed to blister the air. Weapons flashed into sunlight, the massed crowd edging in. A sea of faces twisted with rage.

Hadralt had gone pale. Then he raised his arms and held them high until the outcry fell away. 'Every warrior here,' he said in a trembling voice, 'shall take a piece of your hide, Redmask. They deserve no less in answer to your words.

You seek to take my place? You seek to lead? Lead . . . these *cowards*? You have learned nothing in your exile. Not a warrior here will follow you now, Redmask. Not one.'

'You hired an army,' Redmask said, unable to keep the contempt from his tone. 'You marched at their sides against the Letherii. And then, when the battle was offered and your new-found allies were engaged – fighting for *you* – you all fled. Cowards? That is too kind a word. In my eyes, Hadralt, you and your people are not Awl, not any more, for no true Awl warrior would do such a thing. I came upon their bodies. I was witness to your betrayal. The truth is this. When I am war leader here, before this day's sun touches the horizon, it will fall to every warrior present to prove his worth, to earn the right to follow me. And I shall not be easy to convince. Copper paint on the faces of cowards – no greater insult could you have delivered to me.'

'Climb down,' Hadralt said in a rasp. 'Down off that Letherii nag. Climb down, Redmask, to meet your end.'

Instead he drew out a hollowed rodara horn and lifted it to his lips. The piercing blast silenced all in the encampment except for the dogs, which began a mournful howling in answer. Redmask replaced the horn at his belt. 'It is the way of time,' he said, loud enough for his voice to carry, 'for old enemies to find peace in the passing of ages. We have fought many wars, yet it was the first that holds still in the memory of the Awl, here in this very earth.' He paused, for he could feel the reverberation beneath him – as did others now – as the two K'Chain Che'Malle approached in answer to his call. 'Hadralt, son of Capalah, you are about to stand alone, and you and I shall draw our weapons. Prepare yourself.'

From the ridge, where stood the modest line of Renfayar warriors, six in all, two other shapes loomed into view, huge, towering. Then, in liquid motion, the pair flowed down the slope.

Silence hung heavy, beyond the thump of taloned feet, and hands that had rested on the grips and pommels of weapons slowly fell away.

'My champions,' said Redmask. 'They are ready for your challengers, Hadralt. For your copper-faces.'

The war leader said nothing, and Redmask could see in the warrior's expression that he would not risk losing the force of his words, when his commands were disobeyed – as they would be, a truth of which all who were present were now aware. Destiny awaited, then, in this solitary clash of wills.

Hadralt licked his lips. 'Redmask, when I have killed you, what then of these Kechra?'

Making no reply, Redmask dismounted, walking to halt six paces in front of Hadralt. He unlimbered the rygtha crescent axe and centred his grip on the hafted weapon. 'Your father is gone. You must now let go of his hand and stand alone, Hadralt. The first and last time. You have failed as war leader. You led Awl warriors to battle, then led them in flight. You betrayed allies. And now, you hide here on the very edge of the wastelands, rather than meet the invading Letherii blade to blade, teeth to throat. You will now step aside, or die.'

'Step aside?' Hadralt tilted his head, then managed a rictus smile. 'That choice is not offered to an Awl warrior.'

'True,' Redmask said. 'Only to elders who can no longer defend themselves, or to those too broken by wounds.'

Hadralt bared his teeth. 'I am neither.'

'Nor are you an Awl warrior. Did your father step aside? No, I see that he did not. He looked into your soul, and knew you, Hadralt. And so, old as he was, he fought you.

For his tribe. For his honour.'

Hadralt unsheathed his hook-blades. He was trembling once more.

One of the copper-faces then spoke. 'Capalah ate in the hut of his son. In a single night he sickened and died. In the morning, his face was the colour of blue lichen.'

'Trenys'galah?' Redmask's eyes narrowed in the mask's slits. 'You poisoned your father, Hadralt? Rather than meet his blades? How is it you stand here at all?'

'Poison has no name,' muttered the same copper-face.

Hadralt said, 'I am the reason the Awl still live! You will lead them to slaughter, Redmask! We are not yet ready to face the Letherii. I have been trading for weapons – yes, there are Letherii who believe our cause is just. We give up poor land, and receive fine iron weapons – and now you come, to undo all my plans!'

'I see those weapons,' Redmask said. 'In the hands of many of your warriors. Have they been tested in battle? You are a fool, Hadralt, to believe you won that bargain. The traders you meet are in the employ of the Factor – he profits on both sides of this war—'

'A lie!'

'I was in Drene,' Redmask said, 'less than two weeks ago. I saw the wagons and their crates of cast-off weapons, the iron blades that will shatter at the first blow against a shield. Weapons break, are lost, yet this is what you accepted, this is what you surrendered land for – land home to the dust of our ancestors. Home to Awl spirits, land that has drunk Awl blood.'

'Letherii weapons—'

'Must be taken from the corpses of soldiers – those are the weapons worthy of the term, Hadralt. If you must use their way of fighting, then you must use weapons of a quality to match. Lest you invite your warriors to slaughter. And this,' he added, 'is clearly what you were not prepared to do. Thus, Hadralt, I am led to conclude that you knew the truth. If so, then the traders paid you in more than weapons. Did you share out the coin, War Leader? Do your kin even know of the hoard you hide in your hut?'

Redmask watched as the copper-faces slowly moved away from Hadralt. Recognizing the betrayal their leader had committed upon them, upon the Awl.

'You intended surrender,' Redmask continued, 'didn't you? You were offered an estate in Drene, yes? And slaves and Indebted to do your bidding. You planned on selling off our people, our history—'

'*We cannot win!* '

Hadralt's last words. Three sword-blades erupted from his chest, thrust into his back by his own copper-faces. Eyes wide with shock, the firstborn son and slayer of Capalah, last worthy leader of the Ganetok, stared across at Redmask. Hook-blades fell from his hands, then he sagged forward, sliding from the swords with a ghastly sucking sound almost immediately replaced by the gush of blood.

Eyes blank now in death, the corpse of Hadralt then toppled face-first into the dust.

Redmask returned the rygtha to its harness. 'Seeds fall from the crown of the stalk. What is flawed there makes its every child weak. The curse of cowardice has ended this day. We are the Awl, and I am your war leader.' He paused, looked round, then said, 'And so I shall lead you to war.'

On the ridge overlooking the sprawling encampment, Masarch made a gesture to sun and sky, then earth and wind. 'Redmask now rules the Awl.'

Kraysos, standing on his right, grunted then said, 'Did you truly doubt he would succeed, Masarch? Kechra guard his flanks. He is the charging crest of a river of blood, and he shall flood these lands. And even as the Letherii drown in it, so shall we.'

'You cheated the death night, Kraysos, and so you still fear dying.'

On Masarch's other side, Theven snorted. 'The bledden herb had lost most of its potency. It took neither of us through the night. I screamed to the earth, Masarch. I screamed and screamed. So did Kraysos. We do not fear what is to come.'

'Hadralt was killed by his own warriors,' Masarch said. 'From behind. This does not bode well.'

'You are wrong,' Theven said. 'Redmask's words have turned them all. I did not think such a thing would be possible.'

'I suspect we will be saying that often,' noted Kraysos.

'We should walk down, now,' said Masarch. 'We are his first warriors, and behind us now there are tens of thousands.'

Theven sighed. 'The world has changed.'

'We will live a while longer, you mean.'

The young warrior glanced across at Masarch. 'That is for Redmask to decide.'

Brohl Handar rode at the Atri-Preda's side as the troop made its way down the trader track, still half a day from Drene's gates. The soldiers at their backs were silent, stoking anger and dreams of vengeance, no doubt. There had been elements of Bluerose cavalry stationed in Drene since shortly after the annexation of Bluerose itself. As far as Brohl Handar understood, the acquisition of Bluerose had not been as bloodless as Drene had been. A complicated religion had served to unite disaffected elements of the population, led by a mysterious priesthood the Letherii had been unable to entirely exterminate. Reputedly some rebel groups still existed, active mostly in the mountains lining the western side of the territory.

In any case, the old Letherii policy of transferring Bluerose units to distant parts of the empire continued under Edur rule, certainly suggesting that risks remained. Brohl Handar wondered how the newly appointed Edur overseer in Bluerose was managing, and he reminded himself to initiate contact with his counterpart – stability in Bluerose was essential, for any disruption of Drene's principal supply route and trading partner could prove disastrous if the situation here in the Awl'dan ignited into full-out war.

'You seem thoughtful, Overseer,' Bivatt said after a time.

'Logistics,' he replied.

'If by that you mean military, such needs are my responsibility, sir.'

'Your army's needs cannot be met in isolation, Atri-Preda. If this conflict escalates, as I believe it will, then even the Factor cannot ensure that shortages will not occur, particularly among non-combatants in Drene and surrounding communities.'

'In all-out war, Overseer, the requirements of the military always take precedence. Besides, there is no reason to anticipate shortages. The Letherii are well versed in these matters. Our entire system of transport was honed by the exigencies of expansion. We possess the roads, the necessary sea lanes and merchant vessels.'

'There nonetheless remains a chokepoint,' Brohl Handar pointed out. 'The Bluerose Mountains.'

She shot him a startled glance. 'The primary eastward trade goods through that range are slaves and some luxury foodstuffs from the far south. Bluerose of course is renowned for its mineral wealth, producing a quality of iron that rivals Letherii steel. Tin, copper, lead, lime and firerock, as well as cedar and spruce – all in abundance, while the Bluerose Sea abounds with cod. In return, Drene's vast farms annually produce a surplus harvest of grains. Overseer, you appear to have been misinformed with respect to the materiel demands in question. There will be no shortages—'

'Perhaps you are right.' He paused, then continued, 'Atri-Preda, it is my understanding that the Factor has instituted extensive trafficking of low-grade weapons and armour across the Bluerose Mountains. These weapons are in turn sold to the Awl, in exchange for land or at least the end of dispute over land. Over four hundred broad-bed wagonloads have been shipped thus far. Although the Factor holds the tithe seal, no formal acknowledgement nor taxation of these items has taken place. From this, I can only assume that a good many other supplies are moving to and fro across those mountains, none with official approval.'

'Overseer, regardless of the Factor's smuggling operations, the Bluerose Mountains are in no way a chokepoint when it comes to necessary supplies.'

'I hope you are right, especially given the recent failures of that route.'

'Excuse me? What failures?'

'The latest shipment of poor quality war materiel failed to arrive this side of the mountains, Atri-Preda. Furthermore, brigands struck a major fortress in the pass, routing the Letherii company stationed there.'

'What? I have heard nothing of this! An entire company – routed?'

'So it seems. Alas, that was the extent of the information provided me. Apart from the weapons, I was unsure what other items the Factor lost in that shipment. If, as you tell me, there was nothing more of consequence to fall into the hands of the brigands, then I am somewhat relieved.'

Neither spoke for a time. Brohl Handar was aware that the Atri-Preda's thoughts were racing, perhaps drawn into a tumult of confusion – uncertainty at how much Brohl knew, and by extension the Tiste Edur, regarding Letherii illegalities; and perhaps greater unease at the degree to which she herself had remained ignorant of recent events in Bluerose. That she'd been shaken told him she was not as much an agent of Letur Anict as he had feared.

He decided he had waited long enough. 'Atri-Preda, this imminent war with the Awl. Tell me, have you determined the complement of forces you feel will be necessary to effect victory?'

She blinked, visibly shifting the path of her thinking to address his question. 'More or less, Overseer. We believe that the Awl could, at best, field perhaps eight or nine thousand warriors. Certainly not more than that. As an army, they are undisciplined, divisive due to old feuds and rivalries, and their style of combat is unsuited to fighting as a unit. So, easily broken, unprepared as they are for any engagement taking longer than perhaps a bell. Generally, they prefer to raid and ambush, keeping to small troops and striving to remain elusive. At the same time, their almost absolute dependency on their herds, and the vulnerability of their main camps, will, inevitably, force them to stand and fight – whereupon we annihilate them.'

'A succinct preface,' Brohl Handar said.

'To answer you, we possess six companies of the Bluerose Battalion and near full complement of the reformed Artisan Battalion, along with detachments from the Drene Garrison and four companies from the Harridict Brigade. To ensure substantial numerical superiority, I will request the Crimson Rampant Brigade and at least half of the Merchants' Battalion.'

'Do you anticipate that this Redmask will in any way modify the tactics employed by the Awl?'

'No. He did not do so the first time. The threat he represents lies in his genius for superior ambushes and appallingly effective raids, especially on our supply lines. The sooner he is killed, the swifter the end of the war. If he succeeds in evading our grasp, then we can anticipate a long and bloody conflict.'

'Atri-Preda, I intend to request three K'risnan and four thousand Edur warriors.'

'Victory will be quick, then, Overseer, for Redmask will not be able to hide for long from your K'risnan.'

'Precisely. I want this war over as soon as possible, and with minimal loss of life – on both sides. Accordingly, we must kill Redmask at the first opportunity. And shatter the Awl army, such as it is.'

'You wish to force the Awl to capitulate and seek terms?'

'Yes.'

'Overseer, I will accept capitulation. As for terms, the only ones I will demand are complete surrender. The Awl will be enslaved, one and all. They will be scattered throughout the empire but nowhere near their traditional homelands. As slaves, they will be booty, and the right to pick first will be the reward I grant my soldiers.'

'The fate of the Nerek and the Fent and the Tarthenal.'

'Even so.'

'The notion does not sit well with me, Atri-Preda. Nor will it with any Tiste Edur, including the Emperor.'

'Let us argue this point once we have killed Redmask, Overseer.'

He grimaced, then nodded. 'Agreed.'

Brohl Handar silently cursed this Redmask, who had single-handedly torn through his hopes for a cessation of hostilities, for an equitable peace. Instead, Letur Anict now possessed all the justification he needed to exterminate the Awl, and no amount of tactical genius in ambushes and raids would, in the end, make any difference at all. *It is the curse of leaders to believe they can truly change the world.*

*A curse that has even afflicted me, it seems. Am I too now a slave to Letur Anict and those like him?*

The rage within him was the breath of ice, held deep and overlong, until its searing touch burned in his chest. Upon hearing the copper-face Natarkas's last words, he rose in silent fury and stalked from the hut, then stood, eyes narrowed, until his vision could adjust to the moonless, cloud-covered night. Nearby, motionless as carved sentinels of stone, stood his K'Chain Che'Malle guardians, their eyes faintly glowing smudges in the darkness. As Redmask pushed himself into motion, their heads turned in unison to watch as he set off through the encampment.

Neither creature followed, for which he was thankful. Every step taken by the huge beasts set the camp's dogs to howling and he was in no mood for their brainless cries.

Half the night was gone. He had called in the clan leaders and the most senior elders, one and all crowding into the hut that had once belonged to Hadralt. They had come expecting castigation, more condemnation from their new and much feared war leader, but Redmask had no interest in further belittling the warriors now under his command. The wounds of earlier that day were fresh enough. The courage they had lost could only be regained in battle.

For all of Hadralt's faults, he had been correct in one thing – the old way of fighting against the Letherii was doomed to fail. Yet the now-dead war leader's purported intent to retrain the Awl to a mode of combat identical to that of the Letherii was, Redmask told his followers, also doomed. The

tradition did not exist, the Awl were skilled in the wrong weapons, and loyalties rarely crossed lines of clan and kin.

A new way had to be found.

Redmask had then asked about the mercenaries that had been hired, and the tale that unfolded had proved both complicated and sordid, details teased out from reluctant, shamefaced warriors. Oh, there had been plenty of Letherii coin delivered as part of the land purchase, and that wealth had been originally amassed with the intent of hiring a foreign army – one that had been found on the borderlands to the east. But Hadralt had then grown to covet all that gold and silver, so much so that he betrayed that army – led them to their deaths – rather than deliver the coin into their possession.

Such was the poison that was coin.

Where had these foreigners come from?

From the sea, it appeared, a landing on the north coast of the wastelands, in transports under the flag of Lamatath, a distant peninsular kingdom. Soldier priests and priestesses, sworn to wolf deities.

What had brought them to this continent?

*Prophecy.*

Redmask had started at that answer, which came from Natarkas, the spokesman among the copper-faces, the same warrior who had revealed Hadralt's murder of Capalah.

*A prophecy, War Leader*, Natarkas had continued. *A final war. They came seeking a place they called the Battlefield of the Gods. They called themselves the Grey Swords, the Reve of Togg and Fanderay. There were many women among them, including one of the commanders. The other is a man, one-eyed, who claims he has lost that eye three times—*

*No, War Leader, this one still lives. A survivor of the battle. Hadralt imprisoned him. He lies in chains behind the women's blood-hut—*

Natarkas had fallen silent then, recoiling at the sudden rage he clearly saw in Redmask's eyes.

And now the masked war leader strode through the Ganetok encampment, eastward to the far edge where trenches had been carved into the slope, taking away the wastes of the Awl; to the hut of blood that belonged to the women, then behind it, where, chained to a stake, slept a filthy creature, the lower half of his battered body in the drainage trench, where women's blood and urine trickled through mud, roots and stones on their way to the deep pits beyond.

Halting, then, to stand over the man, who awoke, turning his head to peer with one glittering eye up at Redmask.

'Do you understand me?' the war leader asked.

A nod.

'What is your name?'

The lone eye blinked, and the man reached up to scratch the blistered scar tissue around the empty socket where his other eye had been. He then grunted, as if surprised, and struggled into a sitting position. 'Anaster was my new name,' he said; a strange twist of his mouth that might have been a grin, then the man added, 'but I think my older name better suits me, with a slight alteration, that is. I am Toc.' The smile broadened. 'Toc the Unlucky.'

'I am Redmask—'

'I know who you are. I even know what you are.'

'How?'

'Can't help you there.'

Redmask tried again. 'What hidden knowledge of me do you think you possess?'

The smile faded, and the man looked down, seeming to study the turgid stream of thinned blood round his knees. 'It made little sense back then. Makes even less sense now. You're not what we expected, Redmask.' He coughed, then spat, careful to avoid the women's blood.

'Tell me what you expected?'

Another half-smile, yet Toc would not look up as he said, 'Why, when one seeks the First Sword of the K'Chain Che'Malle, well, one assumes it would be . . . K'Chain Che'Malle. Not human. An obvious assumption, don't you think?'

'First Sword? I do not know this title.'

Toc shrugged. 'K'ell Champion. Consort to the Matron. Hood take me, *King*. They're all the same in your case.' The man finally glanced up once more, and something glistened in his lone eye as he asked, 'So don't tell me the mask fooled them. Please . . .'

The gorge the lone figure emerged from was barely visible. Less than three man-heights across, the crevasse nestled between two steep mountainsides, half a league long and a thousand paces deep. Travellers thirty paces away, traversing the raw rock of the mountain to either side, would not even know the gorge existed. Of course, the likelihood of unwitting travellers anywhere within five leagues of the valley was virtually non-existent. No obvious trails wended through the Bluerose range this far north of the main passes; there were no high pastures or plateaux to invite settlement, and the weather was often fierce.

Clambering over the edge of the gorge into noon sunlight, the figure paused in a crouch and scanned the vicinity. Seeing nothing untoward, he straightened. Tall, thin, his midnight-black hair long, straight and unbound, his face unlined, the features somewhat hooded, eyes like firerock, the man reached into a fold in his faded black hide shirt and withdrew a length of thin chain, both ends holding a plain finger-ring – one gold, the other silver. A quick flip of his right index finger spun the rings round, then wrapped them close as the chain coiled tight. A moment later he reversed the motion. His right hand thus occupied, coiling and uncoiling the chain, he set off.

Southward he went, into and out of swaths of shadow and sunlight, his footfalls almost soundless, the snap of the chain the only noise accompanying him. Tied to his back was a horn and bloodwood bow, unstrung. At his right hip was a quiver of arrows, bloodwood shafts and hawk-feather fletching; at the quiver's moss-packed base, the arrowheads were iron, teardrop-shaped and slotted, the blades on each head forming an

X pattern. In addition to this weapon he carried a baldric-slung plain rapier in a silver-banded turtleshell scabbard. The entire scabbard and its fastening rings were bound with sheepskin to deaden the noise as he padded along. These details to stealth were one and all undermined by the spinning and snapping chain.

The afternoon waned on, until he moved through unbroken shadow as he skirted the eastern flank of each successive valley he traversed, ever southward. Through it all the chain twirled, the rings clacking upon contacting each other, then whispering out and spinning yet again.

At dusk he came to a ledge overlooking a broader valley, this one running more or less east–west, whereupon, satisfied with his vantage point, he settled into a squat and waited. Chain whispering, rings clacking.

Two thousand spins later, the rings clattered, then went still, trapped inside the fist of his right hand. His eyes, which had held fixed on the western mouth of the pass, unmindful of the darkness, had caught movement. He tucked the chain and rings back into the pouch lining the inside of his shirt, then rose.

And began the long descent.

* * *

The Onyx Wizards, purest of the blood, had long since ceased to struggle against the strictures of the prison they had created for themselves. Antiquity and the countless traditions that were maintained to keep its memory alive were the chains and shackles they had come to accept. To accept, they said, was to grasp the importance of responsibility, and if such a thing as a secular god could exist, then to the dwellers of Andara, the last followers of the Black- Winged Lord, that god's name was Responsibility. And it had, over the decades since the Letherii Conquest, come to rival in power the Black-Winged Lord himself.

The young archer, nineteen years of age, was not alone in his rejection of the stolid, outdated ways of the Onyx Wizards. And like many of his compatriots of similar age – the first generation born to the Exile – he had taken a name for himself that bespoke the fullest measure of that rejection.

Clan name cast away, all echoes of the old language – both the common tongue and the priest dialect – dispensed with. His clan was that of the Exiled, now.

For all these gestures of independence, a direct command delivered by Ordant Brid, Reve Master of the Rock among the Onyx Order, could not be ignored.

And so the young warrior named Clip of the Exiled had exited the eternally dark monastery of Andara, had climbed the interminable cliff wall and eventually emerged into hated sunlight to travel overland beneath the blinded stars of day, arriving at an overlook above the main pass.

The small party of travellers he now approached were not traders. No baggage train of goods accompanied them. No shackled slaves stumbled in their wake. They rode Letherii horses, yet even with the presence of at least three Letherii, Clip knew that this was no imperial delegation. No, these were refugees. And they were being hunted.

*And among them walks the brother of my god.*

As Clip drew nearer, as yet unseen by the travellers, he sensed a presence flowing alongside him. He snorted his disgust. 'A slave of the Tiste Edur, tell me, do you not know your own blood? We will tear you free, ghost – something you should have done for yourself long ago.'

'I am unbound,' came the hissing reply.

'Then I suppose you are safe enough from us.'

'Your blood is impure.'

Clip smiled in the darkness. 'Yes, I am a cauldron of failures. Nerek, Letherii – even D'rhasilhani.'

'And Tiste Andii.'

'Then greet me, brother.'

Rasping laughter. 'He has sensed you.'

'Was I sneaking up on them, ghost?'

'They have halted and now await.'

'Good, but can they guess what I will say to them? Can you?'

'You are impertinent. You lack respect. You are about to come face to face with Silchas Ruin, the White Crow—'

'Will he bring word of his lost brother? No? I thought not.'

Another hiss of laughter. 'Oddly enough, I believe you will fit right in with the ones you are about to meet.'

Seren Pedac squinted into the gloom. She was tired. They all were after long days traversing the pass, with no end in sight. Silchas Ruin's announcement that someone was approaching brought them all to a halt beside the sandy fringe of a stream, where insects rose in clouds to descend upon them. The horses snorted, tails flicking and hides rippling.

She dismounted a moment after Silchas Ruin, and followed him across the stream. Behind her the others remained where they were. Kettle slept in the arms of Udinaas, and he seemed disinclined to move lest he wake her. Fear Sengar slipped down from his horse but made no further move.

Standing beside the albino Tiste Andii, Seren could now hear a strange swishing and clacking sound, whispering down over the tumbled rocks beyond. A moment later a tall, lean form appeared, silhouetted against grey stone.

A smudge of deeper darkness flowed out from his side to hover before Silchas Ruin.

'Kin,' said the wraith.

'A descendant of my followers, Wither?'

'Oh no, Silchas Ruin.'

Breath slowly hissed from the Tiste Andii. 'My brother's. They were this close?'

The young warrior drew closer, his pace almost sauntering. The tone of his skin was dusky, not much different from that of a Tiste Edur. He was

twirling a chain in his right hand, the rings on each end blurring in the gloom. 'Silchas Ruin,' he said, 'I greet you on behalf of the Onyx Order of Andara. It has been a long time since we last met a Tiste Andii not of our colony.' The broad mouth quirked slightly. 'You do not look at all as I had expected.'

'Your words verge on insult,' Silchas Ruin said. 'Is this how the Onyx Order would greet me?'

The young warrior shrugged, the chain snapping taut for a beat, then spinning out once more. 'There are K'risnan wards on the trail ahead of you – traps and snares. Nor will you find what you seek in Bluerose, not the city itself nor Jasp nor Outbound.'

'How is it you know what I seek?'

'He said you would come, sooner or later.'

'Who?'

Brows rose. 'Why, your brother. He didn't arrive in time to prevent your getting taken down, nor the slaughter of your followers—'

'Did he avenge me?'

'A moment,' Seren Pedac cut in. 'What is your name?'

A white smile. 'Clip. To answer you, Silchas Ruin, he was not inclined to murder all the Tiste Edur. Scabandari Bloodeye had been destroyed by Elder Gods. A curse was laid upon the lands west of here, denying even death's release. The Edur were scattered, assailed by ice, retreating seas and terrible storms. In the immediate aftermath of the Omtose Phellack curse, their survival was at risk, and Rake left them to it.'

'I do not recall my brother being so . . . merciful.'

'If our histories of that time are accurate,' Clip said, 'then he was rather preoccupied. The sundering of Kurald Emurlahn. Rumours of Osserc in the vicinity, a mercurial dalliance with Lady Envy, arguments and a shaky alliance with Kilmandaros, and then, finally, Silanah, the Eleint who emerged at his side from Emurlahn at the closing of the gate.'

'It seems much of that time is common knowledge among your Order,' Silchas Ruin observed, his tone flat. 'He stayed with you for a lengthy period, then.'

'He stays nowhere for very long,' Clip replied, clearly amused by something.

Seren Pedac wondered if the youth knew how close he was to pushing Ruin over the edge. A few more ill-chosen words and Clip's head would roll from his shoulders. 'Is it your mission,' she asked the Tiste Andii, 'to guide us to our destination?'

Another smile, another snap of the chain. 'It is. You will be, uh, welcomed as guests of the Andara. Although the presence of both Letherii and Tiste Edur in your party is somewhat problematic. The Onyx Order has been outlawed, as you know, subject to vicious repression. The Andara represents the last secret refuge of our people. Its location must not be compromised.'

'What do you suggest?' Seren asked.

'The remainder of this journey,' Clip replied, 'will be through warren. Through Kurald Galain.'

Silchas Ruin cocked his head at that, then grunted, 'I am beginning to understand. Tell me, Clip, how many wizards of the Order dwell in the Andara?'

'There are five, and they are the last.'

'And can they agree on anything?'

'Of course not. I am here by the command of Ordant Brid, Reve Master of the Rock. My departure from the Andara was uneventful, else it is likely I would not be here—'

'Should another of the Order have intercepted you.'

A nod. 'Can you wait for the maelstrom your arrival will bring, Silchas Ruin? I can't.'

'Thus, your greeting earlier should have been qualified. The Order does not welcome us. Rather, this Ordant Brid does.'

'They all choose to speak for the Order,' Clip said, his eyes glittering, 'when it will most confound the others. Now, I can see how eager you all are.' From his right hand the chain whipped out, the silver ring round his index finger, and at the snap of the chain's full length, a gate into Darkness appeared to the warrior's right. 'Call the others here,' Clip said, 'at haste. Even now, bound wraiths serving the Tiste Edur are converging. Of course, they all dream of escape – alas, that we cannot give them. But their Edur masters watch through their eyes, and that won't do.'

Seren Pedac turned about and summoned the others.

Clip stepped to one side and bowed low. 'Silchas Ruin, I invite you to walk through first, and know once more the welcome embrace of true Darkness. Besides,' he added, straightening as Ruin strode towards the gate, 'you will make for us a bright beacon—'

One of Silchas Ruin's swords hissed out, a gleaming blur, the edge slashing across the space where Clip's neck had been, but the young warrior had leaned back . . . just enough, and the weapon sang through air.

A soft laugh from the youth, appallingly relaxed. 'He said you'd be angry.'

Silchas Ruin stared across at Clip for a long moment, then he turned and walked through the gate.

Drawing a deep breath to slow her heart, Seren Pedac glared at Clip. 'You have no idea—'

'Don't I?'

The others appeared, leading their horses. Udinaas, with Kettle tucked into one arm, barely glanced over at Clip before he tugged his horse into the rent.

'You wish to cross swords with a god, Clip?'

'He gave himself away – oh, he's fast all right, and with two weapons he'd be hard to handle, I'll grant you—'

'And will the Reve Master who sent you be pleased with your immature behaviour?'

Clip laughed. 'Ordant could have selected any of a hundred warriors at hand for this mission, Letherii.'

'Yet he chose you, meaning he is either profoundly stupid or he anticipated your irreverence.'

'You waste your time, Acquitor,' Fear Sengar said, coming up alongside her and eyeing Clip. 'He is Tiste Andii. His mind is naught but darkness, in which ignorance and foolishness thrive.'

To Fear the young warrior bowed again. 'Edur, please, proceed. Darkness awaits you.' And he waved at the gate.

As Fear Sengar led his horse into the gate, the chain on Clip's right index finger spun out once more, ending with a clash of rings.

'Why do you do that?' Seren demanded, irritated.

Brows lifted. 'Do what?'

Swearing under her breath, the Acquitor walked through the gate.

# BOOK TWO

# LAYERS OF THE DEAD

Who now strides on my trail
devouring the distance between
no matter how I flee, the wasted
breath of my haste cast into the wind
and these dogs will prevail
dragging me down with howling glee
for the beasts were born fated,
trained in bold vengeance
by my own switch and hand
and no god will stand in my stead,
nor provide me sanctuary, even
should I plead for absolution—
the hounds of my deeds belong
only to me, and they have long hunted
and now the hunt ends.

*Songs of Guilt*
Bet'netrask

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Twice as far as you think
Half the distance you fear
Too thin to hold you
and well over your head
So much cleverer by far
yet witless beyond measure
will you hear my story now?

*Tales of the Drunken Bard*
Fisher

Standing at the rail, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, known to her soldiers as Twilight, watched the sloping shoreline of the Lether River track past. Gulls rode the waves in the shallows. Fisher boats sculled among the reeds, the net-casters pausing to watch the battered fleet work its way towards the harbour. Along the bank birds crowded the leafless branches of trees that had succumbed to the last season's flood. Beyond the dead trees, riders were on the coast road, cantering towards the city to report to various officials, although Yan Tovis was certain that the palace had already been informed that the first of the fleets now approached, with another a bare half-day behind.

She would welcome solid ground beneath her boots again. And the presence of unfamiliar faces within range of her vision, rather than these tired features behind and to either side that she had come to know all too well, and at times, she had to admit, despise.

The last ocean they had crossed was far in their wake now, and for that she was profoundly relieved. The world had proved . . . immense. Even the ancient Letherii charts mapping the great migration route from the land of the First Empire had revealed but a fraction of the vast expanse that was this mortal realm. The scale had left them all belittled, as if their grand dramas were without consequence, as if true meaning was too thinly spread,

too elusive for a single mind to grasp. And there had been a devastating toll paid for these fated journeys. Scores of ships lost, thousands of hands dead – there were belligerent and all too capable empires and peoples out there, few of whom were reluctant to test the prowess and determination of foreign invaders. If not for the formidable sorceries of the Edur and the new cadres of Letherii mages, there would have been more defeats than victories recorded in the ledgers, and yet fewer soldiers and sailors to rest eyes once more upon their homeland.

Hanradi Khalag, Uruth and Tomad Sengar would have dire news to deliver to the Emperor, sufficient to overwhelm their meagre successes, and Yan Tovis was thankful that she would not be present at that debriefing. She would have more than enough to deal with in her own capacity, besides. The Letherii Marines had been decimated – families would need to be informed, death-pensions distributed, lost equipment charged and debts transferred to heirs and kin. Depressing and tedious work and she already longed for the last scroll to be sealed and signed.

As the stands of trees and undergrowth dwindled, replaced by fisher shacks, jetties and then the walled estates of the elite, she stepped back from the rail and looked round the deck. Seeing Taralack Veed positioned near the stern, she walked over.

'We are very close now,' she said. 'Letheras, seat of the Emperor, the largest and richest city on this continent. And still your champion will not come on deck.'

'I see bridges ahead,' the barbarian observed, looking back up the length of the ship.

'Yes. The Tiers. There are canals in the city. Did I not tell you of the Drownings?'

The man grimaced, then swung about once more and spat over the stern rail. 'They die without honour and this entertains you. What is it you would wish Icarium to see, Twilight?'

'He shall need his anger,' she replied in a low voice.

Taralack Veed ran both hands over his scalp, flattening back his hair. 'When he is next awakened, matters of resolve will mean nothing. Your Emperor shall be annihilated, and likely most of this sparkling city with him. If you choose to witness, then you too will die. As will Tomad Sengar and Hanradi Khalag.'

'Alas,' she said after a moment, 'I will not be present to witness the clash. My duties will take me back north, back to Fent Reach.' She glanced across at him. 'A journey of over a month by horseback, Taralack Veed. Will that be distant enough?'

He shrugged. 'I make no promises.'

'But one,' she pointed out.

'Oh?'

'That he will fight.'

'You do not know Icarium as I do. He may remain below, but there is an excitement about him. Anticipation, now, unlike any I have ever seen before. Twilight, he has come to accept his curse; indeed, to embrace it. He sharpens his sword, again and again. Oils his bow. Examines his armour for flaws with every dawn. He has no more questions for me, and that is the most ominous detail of all.'

'He has failed us once,' she said.

'There was . . . intervention. That shall not occur again, unless your carelessness permits it.'

At a gentle bend in the river, Letheras revealed itself, sprawling up and back from the north shore, magnificent bridges arching over garishly painted buildings and the haze of innumerable cookfires. Domes and terraces, towers and platforms loomed, edges blurred in the gold-lit smoke. The imperial quays were directly ahead, just beyond a mole, and the first dromons of the fleet were shipping oars and swinging in towards berths. Scores of figures were gathering along the waterfront, including a bristling procession coming down from the Eternal Domicile, pennons and standards

wavering overhead – the official delegation, although Yan Tovis noted that there were no Edur among them.

It seemed that Triban Gnol's quiet usurpation was all but complete. She was not surprised. The Chancellor had probably begun his plans long before King Ezgara Diskanar downed the fatal draught in the throne room. *Ensuring a smooth transition,* is how he would have defended himself. *The empire is greater than its ruler, and that is where lies the Chancellor's loyalty. Always and for ever more.* Laudable sentiments, no doubt, but the truth was never so clear. The lust for power was a strong current, roiling with clouds that obscured all to everyone, barring, perhaps, Triban Gnol himself, who was at the very centre of the maelstrom. His delusion of control had never been challenged, but Yan Tovis believed that it would not last.

After all, the Tiste Edur had returned. Tomad Sengar, Hanradi Khalag and three other former war chiefs of the tribes, as well as over four thousand seasoned warriors who'd long ago left their naivety behind, lost in Callows, in Sepik, Nemil, the Perish Coast, Shal-Morzinn and Drift Avalii, in a host of foreign waters, among the Meckros – the journey had been long. Fraught —

'The nest is about to be kicked awake,' Taralack Veed said, a rather ugly grin twisting his features.

Yan Tovis shrugged. 'To be expected. We have been absent a long time.'

'Maybe your Emperor is already dead. I see no Tiste Edur in that contingent.'

'I do not think that likely. Our K'risnan would have known.'

'Informed by their god? Yan Tovis, no gift from a god comes for free. More, if it sees fit, it will tell its followers nothing. Or, indeed, it will lie. The Edur do not understand any of this, but you surprise me. Is it not the very nature of your deity, this Errant, to deceive you at every turn?'

'The Emperor is not dead, Taralack Veed.'

'Then it is only a matter of time.'

'So you continually promise.'

But he shook his head. 'I do not speak of Icarium now. I speak of when a god's chosen one *fails*. And they always do, Twilight. We are never enough in their eyes. Never faithful enough, never fearful enough, never abject enough. Sooner or later we betray them, in weakness or in overwrought ambition. We see before us a city of bridges yet what I see and what you see are two different things. Do not let your eyes deceive you – the bridges awaiting us are all too narrow for mortals.'

Their ship slowly angled in towards the central imperial dock like a weary beast of burden, and a handful of Edur officers were now on deck, whilst sailors readied the lines along the port rail. The stench of effluent from the murky waters rose thick enough to sting the eyes.

Taralack Veed spat onto his hands and smoothed back his hair yet again. 'Almost time. I go to collect my champion.'

Noticed by no-one, Turudal Brizad, the Errant, stood with his back to a quayside warehouse thirty or so paces from the main pier. His gaze noted the disembarking of Tomad Sengar – the venerable warrior looking worn and aged – and his expression, as he observed the absence of Tiste Edur among the delegation from the palace, seemed to grow darker by the moment. But neither he nor any of the other Edur held the god's attention for long. His attention sharpened as the Atri-Preda in command of this fleet's Letherii Marines strode the length of the gangway, followed by a half-dozen aides and officers, for he sensed, all at once, that there was something fated about the woman. Yet the details eluded him.

The god frowned, frustrated by his diminishing percipience. He should have sensed immediately what awaited Yan Tovis. Five years ago he would have, thinking nothing of the gift, the sheer privilege of such ascendant power. Not since those final tumultuous days of the First Empire – the succession of ghastly events that led to the intercession of the T'lan Imass to quell the fatal throes of Dessimbelackis's empire – had the Errant felt so disconnected. Chaos was rolling towards Letheras with the force of a cataclysmic wave, an ocean surge that simply engulfed this river's currents

*– yes, it comes from the sea. That much I know, that much I can feel. From the sea, just like this woman, this Twilight.*

Another figure appeared on the plank. A foreigner, the skin of his forearms a swirl of arcane tattoos, the rest of his upper body wrapped in a roughly woven cape, the hood hiding his features. Barbaric, wary, the glitter of eyes taking it all in, pausing halfway down to hawk and spit over the side, a gesture that startled the Errant and, it seemed, most of those standing on the dock.

A moment later another foreigner rose into view, pausing at the top of the gangway. The Errant's breath caught, a sudden chill flowing through him, as if Hood himself had arrived, his cold breath whispering across the back of the god's neck.

*Abyss take me, all that waits within him. The foment none other here can see, could even guess at. Dear son of Gothos and that overgrown hag, the stain of Azath blood is about you like a cloud.* This was more than a curse – all that afflicted this fell warrior. Deliberate skeins were woven about him, the threads of some elaborate, ancient, and deadly ritual. And he knew their flavour. *The Nameless Ones*.

Two soldiers from Triban Gnol's Palace Guard moved to await the Jhag as he slowly walked down to the dock.

The Errant's heart was thudding hard in his chest. *They have delivered a champion, a challenger to the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths—*

The Jhag stepped onto solid ground.

From the buildings beyond the harbour front, birds rose suddenly, hundreds, then thousands, voicing a chorus of shrieks, and beneath the Errant's feet the stones shifted with a heavy, groaning sound. Something large collapsed far into the city, beyond Quillas Canal, and distant screams followed. The Errant stepped out from the wall and saw the bloom of a dust cloud rising behind the caterwauling, panicked pigeons, rooks, gulls and starlings.

The subterranean groaning then ceased and a heavy silence settled.

Icarium's tusked mouth revealed the faintest of smiles, as if pleased with the earth's welcome, and the Errant could not be sure – at this distance – if that smile was truly as childlike as it seemed, or if it was in fact ironic or, indeed, bitter. He repressed the urge to draw closer seeking an answer to that question, reminding himself that he did not want Icarium's attention. Not now, not ever.

*Tomad Sengar, what your son will face . . .*

It was no wonder, he suddenly realized, that all that was to come was obscured in a maelstrom of chaos. *They have brought Icarium . . . into the heart of my power.*

Among the delegation and other Letherii nearby, it was clear that no particular connection had been made between Icarium's first touch on solid ground and the minor earthquake rumbling through Letheras – yet such stirrings were virtually unknown for this region, and while the terror among the birds and the bawling of various beasts of burden continued unabated, already the consternation of those within the Errant's sight was diminishing. *Foolish mortals, so quick to disregard unease.*

In the river beyond, the water slowly lost its shivering agitation and the gulls further out began to settle once again amidst yet more ships angling towards shore. Yet somewhere in the city, a building had toppled, probably some venerable ancient edifice, its foundations weakened by groundwater, its mortar crumbled and supports rotted through.

There would have been casualties – *Icarium's first, but most assuredly not his last.*

*And he smiles.*

Still cursing, Taralack Veed turned to Yan Tovis. 'Unsettled lands – Burn does not rest easy here.'

The Atri-Preda shrugged to hide her queasy shock. 'To the north of here, along the Reach Mountains, the ground shakes often. The same can be said for the north side of the ranges to the far south, the other side of the Draconean Sea.'

She saw the glimmer of bared teeth in the hood's shadow. 'But not in Letheras, yes?'

'I've not heard of such before, but that means little,' she replied. 'This city is not my home. Not where I was born. Not where I grew up.'

Taralack Veed edged closer, facing away from Icarium, who stood listening to the two palace guards as they instructed him in what was to come. 'You fool,' he hissed at her. 'Burn's flesh flinched, Twilight. *Flinched* – because of *him*.'

She snorted.

The Gral cocked his head, and she could feel his contempt. 'What happens now?' he asked.

'Now? Very little. There are secure residences, for you and your champion. As for when the Emperor chooses to face his challengers, that is up to him. Sometimes, he is impatient and the clash occurs immediately. Other times, he waits, often for weeks. But I will tell you what will begin immediately.'

'What is that?'

'The burial urn for Icarium, and his place in the cemetery where resides every challenger Rhulad has faced.'

'Even that place will not survive,' Taralack Veed muttered.

The Gral, feeling sick to his stomach, walked over to Icarium. He did not want to think of the destruction to come. He had seen it once, after all. *Burn, even in your eternal sleep, you felt the stabbing wound that is Icarium – and none of these people here countenanced it, none was ready for the truth. Their hands are not in the earth, the touch is lost – yet look at them: they would call me the savage.*

'Icarium, my friend—'

'Can you not feel it, Taralack Veed?' In his unhuman eyes, the gleam of anticipation. 'This place . . . I have been here before – no, not this city. From the time before this city was born. I have stood on this ground—'

'And it remembered,' growled Taralack Veed.

'Yes, but not in the way you believe. There are truths here, waiting for me. Truths. I have never been as close to them as I am now. Now I understand why I did not refuse you.'

*Refuse me? You considered such a thing? Was it truly so near the edge?*
'Your destiny will soon welcome you, Icarium, as I have said all along. You could no more refuse that than you could the Jaghut blood in your veins.'

A grimace. 'Jaghut . . . yes, they have been here. In my wake. Perhaps, even, on my trail. Long ago, and now again—'

'Again?'

'Omtose Phellack – the heart of this city is ice, Taralack Veed. A most violent imposition.'

'Are you certain? I do not understand—'

'Nor I. Yet. But I shall. No secret shall survive my sojourn here. It will change.'

'What will change?'

Icarium smiled, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, and did not reply.

'You will face this Emperor then?'

'So it is expected of me, Taralack Veed.' A bright glance.

'How could I refuse them?'

*Spirits below, my death draws close. It was what we wanted all along. So why do I now rail at it? Who has stolen my courage?*

'It is as if,' Icarium whispered, 'my life awakens anew.'

The hand shot out in the gloom, snatching the rat from atop the wooden cage holding the forward pump. The scrawny creature had a moment to squeal in panic before its neck was snapped. There was a thud as the dead rat was flung to one side, where it slid down into the murky bilge water.

'Oh, how I hate you when you lose patience,' Samar Dev said in a weary tone. 'That's an invitation to disease, Karsa Orlong.'

'Life is an invitation to disease,' the huge warrior rumbled from the shadows. After a moment, he added, 'I'll feed it to the turtles.' Then he snorted. 'Turtles big enough to drag down this damned ship. These Letherii live in a mad god's nightmare.'

'More than you realize,' Samar Dev muttered. 'Listen. Shouts from shore. We're finally drawing in.'

'The rats are relieved.'

'Don't you have something you need to do to get ready?'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. Knock a few more chips off your sword, or something. Get it sharp.'

'The sword is unbreakable.'

'What about that armour? Most of the shells are broken – it's not worthy of the name and won't stop a blade—'

'No blade will reach it, witch. I shall face but one man, not twenty. And he is small – my people call you children. And that is all you truly are. Short-lived, stick-limbed, with faces I want to pinch. The Edur are little different, just stretched out a bit.'

'Pinch? Would that be before or after decapitation?'

He grunted a laugh.

Samar Dev leaned back against the bale in which something hard and lumpy had been packed – despite the mild discomfort she was not inclined to explore any further. Both the Edur and the Letherii had peculiar ideas about what constituted booty. In this very hold there were amphorae containing spiced human blood and a dozen wax-clad corpses of Edur 'refugees' from Sepik who had not survived the journey, stacked like bolts of cloth against a bloodstained conch-shell throne that had belonged to

some remote island chieftain – whose pickled head probably resided in one of the jars Karsa Orlong leaned against. 'At least we're soon to get off this damned ship. My skin has all dried up. Look at my hands – I've seen mummified ones looking better than these. All this damned salt – it clings like a second skin, and it's moulting—'

'Spirits below, woman, you incite me to wring another rat's neck.'

'So I am responsible for that last rat's death, am I? Needless to say, I take exception to that. Was your hand that reached out, Toblakai. Your hand that —'

'And your mouth that never stops, making me need to kill something.'

'I am not to blame for your violent impulses. Besides, I was just passing time in harmless conversation. We've not spoken in a while, you and I. I find I prefer Taxilian's company, and were he not sick with homesickness and even more miserable than you . . .'

'Conversation. Is that what you call it? Then why are my ears numb?'

'You know, I too am impatient. I've not cast a curse on anyone in a long time.'

'Your squalling spirits do not frighten me,' Karsa Orlong replied. 'And they have been squalling, ever since we made the river. A thousand voices clamouring in my skull – can you not silence them?'

Sighing, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. 'Toblakai . . . you will have quite an audience when you clash swords with this Edur Emperor.'

'What has that to do with your spirits, Samar Dev?'

'Yes, that was too obscure, wasn't it? Then I shall be more precise. There are gods in this city we approach. Resident gods.'

'Do they ever get a moment's rest?'

'They don't live in temples. Nor any signs above the doors of their residences, Karsa Orlong. They are in the city, yet few know of it. Understand, the spirits shriek because they are not welcome, and, even

more worrying, should any one of those gods seek to wrest them away from me, well, there is little I could do against them.'

'Yet they are bound to me as well, aren't they?'

She clamped her mouth shut, squinted across at him in the gloom. The hull thumped as the ship edged up alongside the dock. She saw the glimmer of bared teeth, feral, and a chill rippled through her. 'What do you know of that?' she asked.

'It is my curse to gather souls,' he replied. 'What are spirits, witch, if not simply powerful souls? They haunt me . . . I haunt them. The candles I lit, in that apothecary of yours – they were in the wax, weren't they?'

'Released, then held close, yes. I gathered them . . . after I'd sent you away.'

'Bound them into that knife at your belt,' Karsa said.

'Tell me, do you sense the two Toblakai souls in my own weapon?'

'Yes, no. That is, I sense them, but I dare not approach.'

'Why?'

'Karsa, they are too strong for me. They are like fire in the crystal of that flint, trapped by your will.'

'Not trapped,' he replied. 'They dwell within because they choose to, because the weapon honours them. They are my companions, Samar Dev.' The Toblakai rose suddenly, hunching beneath the ceiling. 'Should a god be foolish enough to seek to steal our spirits, I will kill it.'

She regarded him from half-closed eyes. Declarative statements such as that one were not rare utterances from Karsa Orlong, and she had long since learned that they were not empty boasts, no matter how absurd the assertion might have sounded. 'That would not be wise,' she said after a moment.

'A god devoid of wisdom deserves what it gets.'

'That's not what I meant.'

Karsa stooped momentarily to retrieve the dead rat, then he headed for the hatch.

She followed.

When she reached the main deck, the Toblakai was walking towards the captain. She watched as he placed the sodden rat in the Letherii's hands, then turned away, saying, 'Get the hoists – I want my horse on deck and off this damned hulk.' Behind him, the captain stared down at the creature in his hands, then, with a snarl, he flung it over the rail.

Samar Dev contemplated a few quick words with the captain, to stave off the coming storm – a storm that Karsa had nonchalantly triggered innumerable times before on this voyage – then decided it was not worth the effort. It seemed that the captain concluded much the same, as a sailor hurried up with a bucket of seawater, into which the Letherii thrust his hands.

The main hatch to the cargo hold was being removed, while other hands set to assembling the winches.

Karsa strode to the gangway. He halted, then said in a loud voice, 'This city reeks. When I am done with its Emperor, I may well burn it to the ground.'

The planks sagged and bounced as the Toblakai descended to the landing.

Samar Dev hurried after him.

One of two fully armoured guards had already begun addressing Karsa in contemptuous tones. '—to be unarmed whenever you are permitted to leave the compound, said permission to be granted only by the ranking officer of the Watch. Our immediate task is to escort you to your quarters, where the filth will be scrubbed from your body and hair—'

He got no further, as Karsa reached out, closed his hand on the guard's leather weapons harness, and with a single heave flung the Letherii into the air. Six or more paces to the left he sailed, colliding with three stevedores who had been watching the proceedings. All four went down.

Voicing an oath, the second guard tugged at his shortsword.

Karsa's punch rocked his head back and the man collapsed.

Hoarse shouts of alarm, more Letherii soldiers converging.

Samar Dev rushed forward. 'Hood take you, Toblakai – do you intend to war with the whole empire?'

Glaring at the half-circle of guards closing round him, Karsa grunted then crossed his arms. 'If you are to be my escort,' he said to them, 'then be civil, or I will break you all into pieces.' Then he swung about, pushing past Samar.

'Where is my horse?' he bellowed to the crew still on deck. 'Where is Havok! I grow tired of waiting!' Samar Dev considered returning to the ship, demanding that they sail out, back down the river, back into the Draconean Sea, then beyond. Leaving this unpredictable Toblakai to Letheras and all its hapless denizens.

*Alas, even gods don't deserve that.*

Bugg stood thirty paces from the grand entrance to the Hivanar Estate, one hand out as he leaned against a wall to steady himself. In some alley garden a short distance away, chickens screeched in wild clamour and flung themselves into the grille hatches in frenzied panic. Overhead, starlings still raced back and forth en masse.

He wiped beads of sweat from his brow, struggled to draw a deep breath.

A worthy reminder, he told himself. Everything was only a matter of time. What stretched would then contract. Events tumbled, forces closed to collision, and for all that, the measured pace seemed to remain unchanged, a current beneath all else. Yet, he knew, even that slowed, incrementally, from one age to the next. *Death is written in birth – the words of a great sage. What was her name? When did she live? Ah, so much has whispered away from my mind, these memories, like sand between the fingers. Yet she could see what most cannot – not even the gods. Death and birth. Even in opposition the two forces are bound, and to define one is to define the other.*

And now *he* had come. With his first step, delivering the weight of history. This land's. His own. Two forces in opposition, yet inextricably bound. *Do you now feel as if you have come home, Icarium? I remember you, striding from the sea, a refugee from a realm you had laid to waste. Yet your father did not await you – he had gone, he had walked down the throat of an Azath. Icarium, he was Jaghut, and among the Jaghut no father reaches across to take his child's hand.*

'Are you sick, old man?'

Blinking, Bugg looked across to see a servant from one of the nearby estates, returning from market with a basket of foodstuffs balanced on his head. *Only with grief, dear mortal.* He shook his head.

'It was the floods,' the servant went on. 'Shifting the clay.'

'Aye.'

'Scale House fell down – did you hear? Right into the street. Good thing it was empty, hey? Though I heard there was a fatality – in the street.' The man suddenly grinned. 'A cat!' Laughing, he resumed his journey.

Bugg stared after him; then, with a grunt, he set off for the gate.

* * *

He waited on the terrace, frowning down at the surprisingly deep trench the crew had managed to excavate into the bank, then outward, through the bedded silts of the river itself. The shoring was robust, and Bugg could see few leaks from between the sealed slats. Even so, two workers were on the pump, their bared backs slick with sweat.

Rautos Hivanar came to his side. 'Bugg, welcome. I imagine you wish to retrieve your crew.'

'No rush, sir,' Bugg replied. 'It is clear to me now that this project of yours is . . . ambitious. How much water is coming up from the floor of that pit?'

'Without constant pumping, the trench would overflow in a little under two bells.'

'I bring you a message from your servant, Venitt Sathad, who visited on his way out of the city. He came to observe our progress on the refurbishment of the inn you recently acquired, and was struck with something of a revelation upon seeing the mysterious mechanism we found inside an outbuilding. He further suggested it was imperative that you see it for yourself. Also, he mentioned a collection of artifacts . . . recovered from this trench, yes?'

The large man was silent for a moment, then he seemed to reach a decision, for he gestured Bugg to follow.

They entered the estate, passing through an elongated, shuttered room in which hung drying herbs, down a corridor and into a workroom dominated by a large table and prism lanterns attached to hinged arms so that, if desired, they could be drawn close or lifted clear when someone was working at the table. Resting on the polished wood surface were a dozen or so objects, both metal and fired clay, not one of which revealed any obvious function.

Rautos Hivanar still silent and standing now at his side, Bugg scanned the objects for a long moment, then reached out and picked up one in particular. Heavy, unmarked by pitting or rust, seamlessly bent almost to right angles.

'Your engineers,' Rautos Hivanar said, 'could determine no purpose to these mechanisms.'

Bugg's brows rose at the man's use of the word 'mechanism'. He hefted the object in his hands.

'I have attempted to assemble these,' the merchant continued, 'to no avail. There are no obvious attachment points, yet, somehow, they seem to me to be of a piece. Perhaps some essential item is still buried beneath the river, but we have found nothing for three days now, barring a wheelbarrow's worth of stone chips and shards – and these were recovered in a level of sediment far below these artifacts, leading me to believe that they pre-date them by centuries, if not millennia.'

'Yes,' Bugg muttered. 'Eres'al, a mated pair, preparing flint for tools, here on the bank of the vast marsh. He worked the cores, she did the more

detailed knapping. They came here for three seasons, then she died in childbirth, and he wandered with a starving babe in his arms until it too died. He found no others of his kind, for they had been scattered after the conflagration of the great forests, the wildfires sweeping out over the plains. The air was thick with ash. He wandered, until he died, and so was the last of his line.' He stared unseeing at the artifact, even as its weight seemed to burgeon, threatening to tug at his arms, to drag him down to his knees. 'But Icarium said there would be no end, that the cut thread was but an illusion – in his voice, then, I could hear his father.'

A hand closed on his shoulder and swung him round. Startled, he met Rautos Hivanar's sharp, glittering eyes. Bugg frowned. 'Sir?'

'You – you are inclined to invent stories. Or, perhaps, you are a sage, gifted with unnatural sight. Is this what I am hearing, old man? Tell me, who was this Icarium? Was that the name of the Eres'al? The one who died?'

'I am sorry, sir.' He raised the object higher. 'This artifact – you will find it is identical to the massive object at the inn, barring scale. I believe this is what your servant wanted you to realize – as he himself did when he first looked upon the edifice once we had brought down the walls enclosing it.'

'Are you certain of all this?'

'Yes.' Bugg gestured at the array of items on the table. 'A central piece is missing, as you suspected, sir. Alas, you will not find it, for it is not physical. The framework that will hold it together is one of energy, not matter. And,' he added, still in a distracted tone, 'it has yet to arrive.'

He set the artifact back down and walked from the chamber, back up the corridor, through the dry-rack room, out onto the terrace. Unmindful of the two workers pausing to stare across at him as Rautos Hivanar appeared as if in pursuit – the merchant's hands were spread, palms up, as if beseeching, although the huge man said not a word, his mouth working in silence, as though he had been struck mute. Bugg's glance at the large man was momentary. He continued on, along the passage between estate wall and compound wall, to the side postern near the front gate.

He found himself once more on the street, only remotely noticing the passers-by in the cooler shade of afternoon.

*It has yet to arrive.*

*And yet, it comes.*

'Watch where you're walking, old man!'

'Leave off him – see how he weeps? It's an old man's right to grieve, so leave him be.'

'Must be blind, the clumsy fool . . .'

*And here, long before this city was born, there stood a temple, into which Icarium walked – as lost as any son, the child severed from the thread. But the Elder God within could give him nothing. Nothing beyond what he himself was preparing to do.*

*Could you have imagined, K'rul, how Icarium would take what you did? Take it into himself as would any child seeking a guiding hand? Where are you, K'rul? Do you sense his return? Do you know what he seeks?*

'Clumsy or not, it's a question of manners and proper respect.'

Bugg's threadbare tunic was grasped and he was dragged to one side, then flung up against a wall. He stared at a battered face beneath the rim of a helm. To one side, scowling, another guard.

'Do you know who we are?' the man holding him demanded, baring stained teeth.

'Karos Invictad's thugs, aye. His private police, the ones who kick in doors at the middle of night. The ones who take mothers from babes, fathers from sons. The ones who, in the righteous glory that comes with unchallenged power, then loot the homes of the arrested, not to mention raping the daughters—'

Bugg was thrown a second time against the wall, the back of his head crunching hard on the pitted brick.

'For that, bastard,' the man snarled, 'you'll Drown.'

Bugg blinked sweat from his eyes, then, as the thug's words penetrated, he laughed. 'Drown? Oh, that's priceless. Now, take your hands off me or I will lose my temper.'

Instead, the man tightened his hold on the front of Bugg's tunic, while the other said, 'You were right, Kanorsos, he needs beating.'

'The bully's greatest terror,' Bugg said, 'comes when he meets someone bigger and meaner—'

'And is that you?'

Both men laughed.

Bugg twisted his head, looked round. People were hurrying past – it was never wise to witness such events, not when the murderers of the Patriotists were involved. 'So be it,' he said under his breath. 'Gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you someone bigger and meaner, or, to be more accurate, some*thing*.'

A moment later Bugg was alone. He adjusted his tunic, glanced about, then set off once more for his master's abode.

It was inevitable, he knew, that someone had witnessed the sudden vanishing of two armed and amoured men. But no-one cried out in his wake, for which he was relieved, since he was not inclined to discuss much with anyone right at that moment.

*Did I just lose my temper? It's possible, but then, you were distracted. Perturbed, even. These things happen.*

Feather Witch wasted little time. Off the cursed ships and their countless, endlessly miserable crowds, the eyes always upon her, the expressions of suspicion or contempt and the stench of suffering that came of hundreds of prisoners – the fallen Edur of Sepik, mixed-blood one and all, worse in the eyes of the tribes than Letherii slaves; the scores of foreigners who possessed knowledge deemed useful – at least for now; the Nemil fisher folk; the four copper-skinned Shal-Morzinn warriors dragged from a floundering carrack; denizens of Seven Cities, hailing from Ehrlitan, the

Karang Isles, Pur Atrii and other places; Quon sailors who claimed to be citizens of an empire called Malaz; dwellers of Lamatath and Callows . . .

Among them there were warriors considered worthy enough to be treated as challengers. An axeman from the ruined Meckros City the fleet had descended upon, a Cabalhii monk and a silent woman wearing a porcelain mask the brow of which was marked with eleven arcane glyphs – she had been found near dead in a storm-battered scow south of Callows.

There were others, chained in the holds of other ships in other fleets, but where they came from and what they were was mostly irrelevant. The only detail that had come to fascinate Feather Witch – among all these pathetic creatures – was the bewildering array of gods, goddesses, spirits and ascendants they worshipped. Prayers in a dozen languages, voices reaching out into vast silences – all these forlorn fools and all the unanswered calls for salvation.

No end, in that huge, chaotic world, to the delusions of those who believed they were chosen. Unique among their kind, basking beneath the gaze of gods that gave a damn – as if they would, when the truth was, each immortal visage, for all its peculiar traits, was but a facet of one, and that one had long since turned away, only to fight an eternal battle against itself. From the heavens, only indifference rained down, like ash, stinging the eyes, scratching raw the throat. There was no sustenance in that blinding deluge.

Chosen – now *there* was a conceit of appalling proportions. *Either we all are, or none of us are. And if the former, then we will all face the same judge, the same hand of justice – the wealthy, the Indebted, the master, the slave, the murderer and the victim, the raper and the raped, all of us, so pray hard, everyone – if that helps – and look well to your own shadow*. More likely, in her mind, no-one was chosen, and there was no day of judgement awaiting every soul. Each and every mortal faced a singular end, and that was oblivion.

Oh, indeed, the gods existed, but not one cared a whit for the fate of a mortal's soul, unless they could bend that soul to their will, to serve as but one more soldier in their pointless, self-destructive wars.

For herself, she was past such thinking. She had found her own freedom, basking beneath that blessed rain of indifference. She would do as she willed, and not even the gods could stop her. It would be the gods themselves, she vowed, who would come to her. Beseeching, on their knees, snared in their own game.

She moved silently, now, deep in the crypts beneath the Old Palace. *I was a slave, once – many believe I still am, yet look at me – I rule this buried realm. I alone know where the hidden chambers reside, I know what awaits me within them. I walk this most fated path, and, when the time is right, I will take the throne.*

*The Throne of Oblivion.*

Uruth might well be looking for her right now, the old hag with all her airs, the smugness of a thousand imagined secrets, but Feather Witch knew all those secrets. There was nothing to fear from Uruth Sengar – she had been usurped by events. By her youngest son, by the other sons who then betrayed Rhulad. By the conquest itself. The society of Edur women was now scattered, torn apart; they went where their husbands were despatched; they had surrounded themselves in Letherii slaves, fawners and Indebted. They had ceased to care. In any case, Feather Witch had had enough of all that. She was in Letheras once more and like that fool, Udinaas, she was fleeing her bondage; and here, in the catacombs of the Old Palace, none would find her.

Old storage rooms were already well supplied, equipped a morsel at a time in the days before the long journey across the oceans. She had fresh water, wine and beer, dried fish and beef, fired clay jugs with preserved fruits. Bedding, spare clothes, and over a hundred scrolls stolen from the Imperial Library. Histories of the Nerek, the Tarthenal, the Fent and a host of even more obscure peoples the Letherii had devoured in the last seven or eight centuries – the Bratha, the Katter, the Dresh and the Shake.

And here, beneath the Old Palace, Feather Witch had discovered chambers lined with shelves on which sat thousands of mouldering scrolls, crumbling clay tablets and worm-gnawed bound books. Of those she had examined, the faded script in most of them was written in an arcane style of

Letherii that proved difficult to decipher, but she was learning, albeit slowly. A handful of old tomes, however, were penned in a language she had never seen before.

The First Empire, whence this colony originally came all those centuries ago, seemed to be a complicated place, home to countless peoples each with their own languages and gods. For all the imperial claims to being the birth of human civilization, it was clear to Feather Witch that no such claim could be taken seriously. Perhaps the First Empire marked the initial nation consisting of more than a single city, probably born out of conquest, one city-state after another swallowed up by the rampaging founders. Yet even then, the fabled Seven Cities was an empire bordered by independent tribes and peoples, and there had been wars and then treaties. Some were broken, most were not. Imperial ambitions had been stymied, and it was this fact that triggered the age of colonization to distant lands.

The First Empire had met foes who would not bend a knee. This was, for Feather Witch, the most important truth of all, one that had been conveniently and deliberately forgotten. She had gained strength from that, but such details were themselves but confirmation of discoveries she had already made – out in the vast world beyond. There had been clashes, fierce seafarers who took exception to a foreign fleet's invading their waters. Letherii and Edur ships had gone down, figures amidst flotsam-filled waves, arms raised in hopeless supplication – the heave and swirl of sharks, dhenrabi and other mysterious predators of the deep – screams, piteous screams, they still echoed in her head, writhing at the pit of her stomach. Revulsion and glee both.

The storms that had battered the fleet, especially west of the Draconean Sea, had revealed the true immensity of natural power, its fickle thrashings that swallowed entire ships – there was delight in being so humbled, coming upon her with the weight of revelation. The Lether Empire was puny – like Uruth Sengar, it held to airs of greatness when it was but one more pathetic hovel of cowering mortals.

She would not regret destroying it.

Huddled now in her favoured chamber, the ceiling overhead a cracked dome, its plaster paintings obscured by stains and mould, Feather Witch sat herself down cross-legged and drew out a small leather pouch. Within, her most precious possession. She could feel its modest length through the thin hide, the protuberances, the slightly ragged end, and, opposite, the curl of a nail that had continued growing. She wanted to draw it out, to touch once again its burnished skin—

'Foolish little girl.'

Hissing, Feather Witch flinched back from the doorway. A twisted, malformed figure occupied the threshold – she had not seen it in a long time, had almost forgotten – 'Hannan Mosag. I do not answer to you. And if you think me weak—'

'Oh no,' wheezed the Warlock King, 'not that. I chose my word carefully when I said "foolish". I know you have delved deep into your Letherii magic. You have gone far beyond casting those old, chipped tiles of long ago, haven't you? Even Uruth has no inkling of your Cedance – you did well to disguise your learning. Yet, for all that, you are still a fool, dreaming of all that you might achieve – when in truth you are alone.'

'What do you want? If the Emperor were to learn that you're skulking around down here—'

'He will learn nothing. You and I, Letherii, we can work together. We can destroy that abomination—'

'With yet another in his place – you.'

'Do you truly think I would have let it come to this? Rhulad is mad, as is the god who controls him. They must be expunged.'

'I know your hunger, Hannan Mosag—'

'You do not!' the Edur snapped, a shudder taking him. He edged closer into the chamber, then held up a mangled hand. 'Look carefully upon me, woman. See what the Chained One's sorcery does to the flesh – oh, we are bound now to the power of chaos, to its taste, its seductive flavour. It should never have come to this—'

'So you keep saying,' she cut in with a sneer. 'And how would the great empire of Hannan Mosag have looked? A rain of flowers onto every street, every citizen freed of debt, with the benign Tiste Edur overseeing it all?' She leaned forward. 'You forget, I was born among your people, in your very tribe, Warlock King. I remember going hungry during the unification wars. I remember the cruelty you heaped upon us slaves – when we got too old, you used us as bait for beskra crabs – threw our old ones into a cage and dropped it over the side of your knarri. Oh, yes, drowning was a mercy, but the ones you didn't like you kept their heads above the tide line, you let the crabs devour them alive, and laughed at the screams. We were muscle and when that muscle was used up, we were meat.'

'And is Indebtedness any better—'

'No, for that is a plague that spreads to every family member, every generation.'

Hannan Mosag shook his misshapen head. 'I would not have succumbed to the Chained One. He believed he was using me, but I was using him. Feather Witch, there would have been no war. No conquest. The tribes were joined as one – I made certain of that. Prosperity and freedom from fear awaited us, and in that world the lives of the slaves would have changed. Perhaps, indeed, the lives of Letherii among the Tiste Edur would have proved a lure to the Indebted in the southlands, enough to shatter the spine of this empire, for we would have offered freedom.'

She turned away, deftly hiding the small leather bag. 'What is the point of this, Hannan Mosag?'

'You wish to bring down Rhulad—'

'I will bring you all down.'

'But it must begin with Rhulad – you can see that. Unless he is destroyed, and that sword with him, you can achieve nothing.'

'If you could have killed him, Warlock King, you would have done so long ago.'

'Oh, but I will kill him.'

She glared across at him. 'How?'

'Why, with his own family.'

Feather Witch was silent for a dozen heartbeats. 'His father cowers in fear. His mother cannot meet his eyes. Binadas and Trull are dead, and Fear has fled.'

'Binadas?' The breath hissed slowly from Hannan Mosag. 'I did not know that.'

'Tomad dreamed of his son's death, and Hanradi Khalag quested for his soul – and failed.'

The Warlock King regarded her with hooded eyes. 'And did my K'risnan attempt the same of Trull Sengar?'

'No, why would he? Rhulad himself murdered Trull. Chained him in the Nascent. If that was meant to be secret, it failed. We heard – we slaves hear everything—'

'Yes, you do, and that is why we can help each other. Feather Witch, you wish to see this cursed empire collapse – so do I. And when that occurs, know this: I intend to take my Edur home. Back to our northlands. If the south is in flames, that is of no concern to me – I leave the Letherii to the Letherii, for no surer recipe for obliteration do any of us require. I knew that from the very start. Lether cannot sustain itself. Its appetite is an addiction, and that appetite exceeds the resources it needs to survive. Your people had already crossed that threshold, although they knew it not. It was my dream, Feather Witch, to raise a wall of power and so ensure the immunity of the Tiste Edur. Tell me, what do you know of the impending war in the east?'

'What war?'

Hannan Mosag smiled. 'The unravelling begins. Let us each grasp a thread, you at one end, me at the other. Behind you, the slaves. Behind me, all the K'risnan.'

'Does Trull Sengar live?'

'It is Fear Sengar who seeks the means of destroying Rhulad. And I mean for him to find it. Decide now, Feather Witch. Are we in league?'

She permitted herself a small smile. 'Hannan Mosag, when the moment of obliteration comes . . . you had better crawl fast.'

'I don't want to see them.'

With these words the Emperor twisted on his throne, legs drawing up, and seemed to focus on the wall to his left. The sword in his right hand, point resting on the dais, was trembling.

Standing in an alcove to one side, Nisall wanted to hurry forward, reaching out for the beleaguered, frightened Edur.

But Triban Gnol stood facing the throne. This audience belonged to him and him alone; nor would the Chancellor countenance any interruption from her. He clearly detested her very presence, but on that detail Rhulad had insisted – Nisall's only victory thus far.

'Highness, I agree with you. Your father, alas, insisted I convey to you his wishes. He would greet his most cherished son. Further, he brings dire news —'

'His favourite kind,' Rhulad muttered, eyes flickering as if he was seeking an escape from the chamber. 'Cherished? His word? No, I thought not. What he cherishes is my power – he wants it for himself. Him and Binadas—'

'Forgive my interruption, Highness,' Triban Gnol said, bowing his head. 'There is news of Binadas.'

The Emperor flinched. Licked dry lips. 'What has happened?'

'It is now known,' the Chancellor replied, 'that Binadas was murdered. He was commanding a section of the fleet. There was a battle with an unknown enemy. Terrible sorcery was exchanged, and the remnants of both fleets were plunged into the Nascent, there to complete their battle in that flooded realm. Yet, this was all prelude. After the remaining enemy ships fled, a demon came upon Binadas's ship. Such was its ferocity that all the Edur

were slaughtered. Binadas himself was pinned to his chair by a spear flung by that demon.'

'How,' Rhulad croaked, 'how is all this known?'

'Your father . . . dreamed. In that dream he found himself a silent, ghostly witness, drawn there as if by the caprice of a malevolent god.'

'What of that demon? Does it still haunt the Nascent? I shall hunt it down, I shall destroy it. Yes, there must be vengeance. He was my brother. I sent him, my brother, sent him. They all die by my word. All of them, and this is what my father will tell me – oh how he hungers for that moment, but he shall not have it! The demon, yes, the demon who stalks my kin . . .' His fevered ramble trickled away, and so ravaged was Rhulad's face that Nisall had to look away, lest she cry out.

'Highness,' the Chancellor said in a quiet voice.

Nisall stiffened – this was what Triban Gnol was working towards – all that had come before was for this precise moment.

'Highness, the demon has been delivered. It is here, Emperor.'

Rhulad seemed to shrink back into himself. He said nothing, though his mouth worked.

'A challenger,' Triban Gnol continued. 'Tarthenal blood, yet purer, Hanradi Khalag claims, than any Tarthenal of this continent. Tomad knew him for what he was the moment the giant warrior took his first step onto Edur bloodwood. Knew him, yet could not face him, for Binadas's soul is in the Tarthenal's shadow – along with a thousand other fell victims. They clamour, one and all, for both freedom and vengeance. Highness, the truth must now be clear to you. Your god has delivered him. To you, so that you may slay him, so that you may avenge your brother's death.'

'Yes,' Rhulad whispered. 'He laughs – oh, how he laughs. Binadas, are you close? Close to me now? Do you yearn for freedom? Well, if I cannot have it, why should you? No, there is no hurry now, is there? You wanted this throne, and now you learn how it feels – just a hint, yes, of all that haunts me.'

'Highness,' the Chancellor murmured, 'are you not eager to avenge Binadas? Tomad—'

'Tomad!' Rhulad jolted on the throne, glared at Triban Gnol – who visibly rocked back. 'He saw the demon slay Binadas, and now he thinks it will do the same to me! *That* is the desire for vengeance at work here, you fish-skinned fool! Tomad wants me to die because I killed Binadas! And Trull! I have killed his children! But whose blood burns in my veins? *Whose?* Where is Hanradi? Oh, I know why he will not be found in the outer room – he goes to Hannan Mosag! They plunge into Darkness and whisper of betrayal – I am past my patience with them!'

Triban Gnol spread his hands. 'Highness, I had intended to speak to you of this, but at another time—'

'Of what? Out with it!'

'A humble inquiry from Invigilator Karos Invictad, Highness. With all respect, I assure you, he asks your will in regard to matters of treason – not among the Letherii, of course, for he has that well in hand – but among the Tiste Edur themselves . . .'

Nisall's gasp echoed in the suddenly silent room. She looked across to where Edur guards were stationed, and saw them motionless as statues.

Rhulad looked ready to weep. 'Treason among the Edur? My Edur? No, this cannot be – has he proof?'

A faint shrug. 'Highness, I doubt he would have ventured this inquiry had he not inadvertently stumbled on some . . . sensitive information.'

'Go away. Get out. Get out!'

Triban Gnol bowed, then backed from the chamber. Perhaps he'd gone too far, yet the seed had been planted. In most fertile soil.

As soon as the outer doors closed, Nisall stepped from the alcove. Rhulad waved her closer.

'My love,' he whispered in a child's voice, 'what am I to do? The demon – they brought it here.'

'You cannot be defeated, Emperor.'

'And to destroy it, how many times must I die? No, I'm not ready. Binadas was a powerful sorcerer, rival to the Warlock King himself. My brother . . .'

'It may be,' Nisall ventured, 'that the Chancellor erred in the details of that. It may indeed be that Tomad's dream was a deceitful sending – there are many gods and spirits out there who see the Crippled God as an enemy.'

'No more. I am cursed into confusion; I don't understand any of this. What is happening, Nisall?'

'Palace ambitions, beloved. The return of the fleets has stirred things up.'

'My own Edur . . . plotting treason . . .'

She reached out and set a hand on his left shoulder. The lightest of touches, momentary, then withdrawn once more. *Dare I?* 'Karos Invictad is perhaps the most ambitious of them all. He revels in his reign of terror among the Letherii, and would expand it to include the Tiste Edur. Highness, I am Letherii – I know men like the Invigilator, I know what drives them, what feeds their malign souls. He hungers for control, for his heart quails in fear at all that is outside his control – at chaos itself. In his world, he is assailed on all sides. Highness, Karos Invictad's ideal world is one surrounded by a sea of corpses, every unknown and unknowable obliterated. And even then, he will find no peace.'

'Perhaps he should face me in the arena,' Rhulad said, with a sudden vicious smile. 'Face to face with a child of chaos, yes? But no, I need him to hunt down his Letherii. The traitors.'

'And shall this Letherii be granted domination over Tiste Edur as well?'

'Treason is colourless,' Rhulad said, shifting uneasily on the throne once more. 'It flows unseen no matter the hue of blood. I have not decided on that. I need to think, to understand. Perhaps I should summon the Chancellor once again.'

'Highness, you once appointed an Edur to oversee the Patriotists. Do you recall?'

'Of course I do. Do you think me an idiot, woman?'

'Perhaps Bruthen Trana—'

'Yes, that's him. Not once has he reported to me. Has he done as I commanded? How do I even know?'

'Summon him, then, Highness.'

'Why does he hide from me? Unless he conspires with the other traitors.'

'Highness, I know for a truth that he seeks an audience with you almost daily.'

'You?' Rhulad glanced over at her, eyes narrowing. 'How?'

'Bruthen Trana sought me out, beseeching me to speak to you on his behalf. The Chancellor denies him an audience with you—'

'Triban Gnol cannot deny such things! He is a Letherii! Where are my Edur? Why do I never see them? And now Tomad has returned, and Hanradi Khalag! None of them will speak to me!'

'Highness, Tomad waits in the outer chamber—'

'He knew I would deny him. You are confusing me, whore. I don't need you – I don't need anyone! I just need time. To think. That is all. They're all frightened of me, and with good reason, oh yes. Traitors are always frightened, and when their schemes are discovered, oh how they plead for their lives! Perhaps I should kill everyone – a sea of corpses, then there would be peace. And that is all I want. Peace. Tell me, are the people happy, Nisall?'

She bowed her head. 'I do not know, Highness.'

'Are you? Are you happy with me?'

'I feel naught but love for you, Emperor. My heart is yours.'

'The same words you spoke to Diskanar, no doubt. And all the other men you've bedded. Have your slaves draw a bath – you stink of sweat, woman. Then await me beneath silks.' He raised his voice. 'Call the Chancellor! We

wish to speak to him immediately! Go, Nisall, your Letherii stink makes me ill.'

As she backed away Rhulad raised his free hand. 'My dearest, the golden silks – you are like a pearl among those. The sweetest pearl . . .'

Bruthen Trana waited in the corridor until Tomad Sengar, denied audience with the Emperor, departed the Citizens' Chamber. Stepping into the elder's path he bowed and said, 'I greet you, Tomad Sengar.'

Distracted, the older Tiste Edur frowned at him. 'Den- Ratha. What do you wish from me?'

'A word or two, no more than that. I am Bruthen Trana—'

'One of Rhulad's sycophants.'

'Alas, no. I was appointed early in the regime to oversee the Letherii security organization known as the Patriotists. As part of my responsibilities, I was to report to the Emperor in person each week. As of yet, I have not once addressed him. The Chancellor has interposed himself and turns me away each and every time.'

'My youngest son suckles at Gnol's tit,' Tomad Sengar said in a low, bitter voice.

'It is my belief,' Bruthen Trana said, 'that the Emperor himself is not entirely aware of the extent of the barriers the Chancellor and his agents have raised around him, Elder Sengar. Although I have sought to penetrate them, I have failed thus far.'

'Then why turn to me, Den-Ratha? I am even less able to reach through to my son.'

'It is the Tiste Edur who are being isolated from their Emperor,' Bruthen said. 'Not just you and I. All of us.'

'Hannan Mosag—'

'Is reviled, for it is well understood that the Warlock King is responsible for all of this. His ambition, his pact with an evil god. He sought the sword

for himself, did he not?'

'Then Rhulad is truly alone?'

Bruthen Trana nodded, then added, 'There is a possibility . . . there is one person. The Letherii woman who is his First Concubine—'

'A Letherii?' Tomad snarled. 'You must be mad. She is an agent for Gnol, a spy. She has corrupted Rhulad – how else could she remain as First Concubine? My son would never have taken her, unless she had some nefarious hold over him.' The snarl twisted the elder's features. 'You are being used, warrior. You and I shall not speak again.'

Tomad Sengar pushed him to one side and marched down the corridor. Bruthen Trana turned to watch him go.

Drawing out a crimson silk cloth, Karos Invictad daubed at the sweat on his brow, his eyes fixed on the strange two-headed insect as it circled in place, round and round and round in its box cage. 'Not a single arrangement of tiles will halt this confounded, brainless creature. I begin to believe this is a hoax.'

'Were it me, sir,' Tanal Yathvanar said, 'I would have crushed the whole contraption under heel long ago. Indeed it must be a hoax – the proof is that you have not defeated it yet.'

The Invigilator's gaze lifted, regarded Tanal. 'I do not know which is the more disgusting, you acknowledging defeat by an insect, or your pathetic attempts at flattery.' He set the cloth down on the table and leaned back. 'The studied pursuit of solutions requires patience, and, more, a certain cast of intellect. This is why you will never achieve more than you have, Tanal Yathvanar. You totter at the very edge of your competence – ah, no need for the blood to so rush to your face, it is what you are that I find so useful to me. Furthermore, you display uncommon wisdom in restraining your ambition, so that you make no effort to attempt what is beyond your capacity. That is a rare talent. Now, what have you to report to me this fine afternoon?'

'Master, we have come very close to seeing our efforts extended to include the Tiste Edur.'

Karos Invictad's brows rose. 'Triban Gnol has spoken to the Emperor?'

'He has. Of course, the Emperor was shaken by the notion of traitors among the Edur. So much so that he ordered the Chancellor from the throne room. For a while.' Tanal Yathvanar smiled. 'A quarter-bell, apparently. The subject was not broached again that day, yet it is clear that Rhulad's suspicions of his fellow Edur have burgeoned.'

'Very well. It will not be long, then.' The Invigilator leaned forward again, frowning down at the puzzle box. 'It is important that all obstacles be removed. The only words the Emperor should be hearing should come from the Chancellor. Tanal, prepare a dossier on the First Concubine.' He looked up again. 'You understand, don't you, that your opportunity to free that scholar you have chained far below has passed? There is no choice now but that she must disappear.'

Unable to speak, Tanal Yathvanar simply nodded.

'I note this – and with some urgency – because you have no doubt grown weary of her in any case, and if not, you should have. I trust I am understood. Would you not enjoy replacing her with the First Concubine?' Karos smiled.

Tanal licked dry lips. 'Such a dossier will be difficult, Master—'

'Don't be a fool. Work with the Chancellor's agents. We're not interested in factual reportage here. Invent what we need to incriminate her. That should not be difficult. Errant knows, we have had enough practice.'

'Even so – forgive me, sir – but she is the Emperor's only lover.'

'You do not understand at all, do you? She is not Rhulad's first love. No, that woman, an Edur, killed herself – oh, never mind the official version, I have witness reports of that tragic event. She was carrying the Emperor's child. Thus, in every respect imaginable, she betrayed him. Tanal, for Rhulad the rains have just passed, and while the clay feels firm underfoot, it is in truth thin as papyrus. At the first intimation of suspicion, Rhulad will

lose his mind to rage – we will be lucky to wrest the woman from his clutches. Accordingly, the arrest must take effect in the palace, in private, when the First Concubine is alone. She must then be brought here immediately.'

'Do you not believe the Emperor will demand her return?'

'The Chancellor will advise against it, of course. Please, Tanal Yathvanar, leave the subtle details of human – and Edur – natures to those of us who fully comprehend them. You shall have the woman, fear not. To do with as you please – once we have her confession, that is. Bloodied and bruised, is that not how you prefer them? Now, leave me. I believe I have arrived at a solution to this contraption.'

* * *

Tanal Yathvanar stood outside the closed door for a time, struggling to slow his heart, his mind racing. Murder Janath Anar? Make her disappear like all the others? *Fattening the crabs at the bottom of the river? Oh, Errant, I do not know . . . if . . . I do not know—*

From behind the office door came a snarl of frustration.

Oddly enough, the sound delighted him. *Yes, you towering intellect, it defeats you again. That two-headed nightmare in miniature. For all your lofty musings on your own genius, this puzzle confounds you. Perhaps, Invigilator, the world is not how you would have it, not so clear, not so perfectly designed to welcome your domination.* He forced himself forward, down the hall. No, he would not kill Janath Anar. He loved her. Karos Invictad loved only himself – it had always been so, Tanal suspected, and that was not going to change. The Invigilator understood nothing of human nature, no matter how he might delude himself. Indeed, Karos had given himself away in that careless command to kill her. *Yes, Invigilator, this is my revelation. I am smarter than you. I am superior in all the ways that truly matter. You and your power, it is all compensation for what you do not understand about the world, for the void in your soul where compassion belongs. Compassion, and the love that one can feel for another person.*

He would tell her, now. He would confess the depth of his feelings, and then he would unchain her, and they would flee. Out of Letheras. Beyond the reach of the Patriotists. Together, they would make their lives anew.

He hurried down the damp, worn stairs, beyond the sight of everyone now, down into his own private world. Where his love awaited him.

The Invigilator could not reach everywhere – as Tanal was about to prove.

Down through darkness, all so familiar now he no longer needed a lantern. Where *he* ruled, not Karos Invictad, no, not here. This was why the Invigilator attacked him again and again, with ever the same weapon, the implicit threat of exposure, of defamation of Tanal Yathvanar's good name. But all these crimes, they belonged to Karos Invictad. Imagine the counter-charges Tanal could level against him, if he needed to – he had copies of records; he knew where every secret was buried. The accounts of the bloodstained wealth the Invigilator had amassed from the estates of his victims – Tanal knew where those records were kept. And as for the corpses of the ones who had disappeared . . .

Reaching the barred door to the torture chamber, he drew down the lantern he had left on a ledge and, after a few efforts, struck the wick alight. He lifted clear the heavy bar and pushed open the heavy door with one hand.

'Back so soon?' The voice was a raw croak.

Tanal stepped into the chamber. 'You have fouled yourself again. No matter – this is the last time, Janath Anar.'

'Come to kill me, then. So be it. You should have done that long ago. I look forward to leaving this broken flesh. You cannot chain a ghost. And so, with my death, you shall become the prisoner. You shall be the one who is tormented. For as long as you live, and I do hope it is long, I shall whisper in your ear—' She broke into a fit of coughing.

He walked closer, feeling emptied inside, his every determination stripped away by the vehemence in her words.

The manacles seemed to weep blood – she had been struggling against her fetters again. *Dreaming of haunting me, of destroying me. How is she any different? How could I have expected her to be any different?* 'Look at you,' he said in a low voice. 'Not even human any more – do you not care about your appearance, about how you want me to see you when I come here?'

'You're right,' she said in a grating voice, 'I should have waited until you arrived, until you came close. Then voided all over you. I'm sorry. I'm afraid my bowels are in bad shape right now – the muscles are weakening, inevitably.'

'You'll not haunt me, woman, your soul is too useless – the Abyss will sweep it away, I'm sure. Besides, I won't kill you for a long while yet—' 'I don't think it's up to you any more, Tanal Yathvanar.'

'It's *all* up to me!' he shrieked. 'All of it!'

He stalked over to her and began unshackling her arms, then her legs. She lost consciousness before he had freed her second wrist, and slid into a heap that almost snapped both her legs before he managed to work the manacles from her battered, torn ankles.

She weighed almost nothing, and he was able to move quickly, up twenty or so stairs, until he reached a side passage. The slimy cobble floor underfoot gradually sloped downward as he shambled along, the woman over one shoulder, the lantern swinging from his free hand. Rats scurried from his path, out to the sides where deep, narrow gutters had been cut by an almost constant flow of runoff.

Eventually, the drip of dark water from the curved ceiling overhead became a veritable rain. The droplets revived Janath momentarily, enough for her to moan, then cough for a half-dozen strides – he was thankful when she swooned once more, and the feeble clawing on his back ceased.

And now came the stench. *Disappeared? Oh no, they are here. All of them. All the ones Karos Invictad didn't like, didn't need, wanted out of the way.*

Into the first of the huge domed chambers with its stone walkway encircling a deep well, in which white-shelled crabs clambered amidst bones. This well was entirely filled, which is what had forced the opening of another, then another and another – there were so many of them, down here beneath the river.

Arriving at the last of the chambers, Tanal set her down, where he shackled one of her legs to the wall. On either side of her, she had company, although neither victim was alive. He stepped back as she stirred once more.

'This is temporary,' he said. 'You won't be joining your friends beside you. When I return – and it won't be long – I will move you again. To a new cell, known to no-one but me. Where I will teach you to love me. You'll see, Janath Anar. I am not the monster you believe me to be. Karos Invictad is the monster – he has twisted me, he has made me into what I am. But Karos Invictad is not a god. Not immortal. Not . . . infallible. As we shall all discover. He thinks I want her, that whore of the Emperor's – that dirty, fallen bitch. He could not be more wrong. Oh, there's so much to do now, but I promise I won't be gone long. You'll see, my love . . .'

She awoke to the sound of his footfalls, dwindling, then lost to the trickle and drip of water. It was dark, and cold, colder than it had ever been before – she was somewhere else now, some other crypt, *but the same nightmare*.

She lifted a hand – as best she could – and wiped at her face. Her hand came away slick with slime. Yet . . . *the chains, they're gone*. She struggled to draw her limbs inward, then almost immediately heard the rattle of iron links snaking across stone. *Ah, not completely.*

And now pain arrived, in every joint, piercing fire. Ligaments and tendons, stretched for so long, now began contracting like burning ropes – *oh, Errant take me—*

Her eyes flickered open once more, and with returning consciousness she became aware of savage hunger, coiling in her shrunken stomach. Watery waste trickled loose.

There was no point in weeping. No point in wondering which of them was madder – him for his base appetites and senseless cruelty, or her for clinging so to this remnant of a life. A battle of wills, yet profoundly unequal – she knew that in her heart, had known it all along.

The succession of grand lectures she had devised in her mind all proved hollow conceits, their taste too bitter to bear. He had defeated her, because his were weapons without reason – *and so I answered with my own madness. I thought it would work. Instead, I ended up surrendering all that I had that was of any worth.*

*And so now, the cold of death stealing over me, I can only dream of becoming a vengeful ghost, eager to torment the one who tormented me, eager to be to him as he was to me. Believing that such a balance was just, was righteous.*

*Madness. To give in kind is to be in kind.*

*So now, let me leave here, for ever gone—*

And she felt that madness reach out to her, an embrace that would sweep away her sense of self, her knowledge of who she had been, once, that proud, smug academic with her pristine intellect ordering and reordering the world. Until even practicality was a quaint notion, not even worthy of discourse, because the world outside wasn't worth reaching out to, not really – besides, it was sullied, wasn't it? By men like Tanal Yathvanar and Karos Invictad – the ones who revelled in the filth they made, because only the stench of excess could reach through to their numbed senses—

*—as it reaches through to mine. Listen! He returns, step by hesitant step —*

A calloused hand settled on her brow.

Janath Anar opened her eyes.

Faint light, coming from every direction. Warm light, gentle as a breath. Looming above her was a face. Old, lined and weathered, with eyes deep as the seas, even as tears made them glisten.

She felt the chain being dragged close. Then the old man tugged with one hand and the links parted like rotted reeds. He reached down, then, and lifted her effortlessly.

*Abyss, yours is such a gentle face . . .*

Darkness, once more.

Beneath the bed of the river, below silts almost a storey thick, rested the remains of almost sixteen thousand citizens of Letheras. Their bones filled ancient wells that had been drilled before the river's arrival – before the drainage course from the far eastern mountains changed cataclysmically, making the serpent lash its tail, the torrent carving a new channel, one that inundated a nascent city countless millennia ago.

Letherii engineers centuries past had stumbled upon these submerged constructs, wondering at the humped corridors and the domed chambers, wondering at the huge, deep wells with their clear, cold water. And baffled to explain how such tunnels remained more or less dry, the cut channels seeming to absorb water like runners of sponge.

No records existed any more recounting these discoveries – the tunnels and chambers and wells were lost knowledge to all but a chosen few. And of the existence of parallel passages, the hidden doors in the walls of corridors, and the hundreds of lesser tombs, not even those few were aware. Certain secrets belonged exclusively to the gods.

The Elder God carried the starved, brutalized woman into one of those side passages, the cantilevered door swinging shut noiselessly behind him. In his mind there was recrimination, a seething torrent of anger at himself. He had not imagined the full extent of depravity and slaughter conducted by the Patriotists, and he was sorely tempted to awaken himself, unleashing his fullest wrath upon these unmitigated sadists.

Of course, that would lead to unwarranted attention, which would no doubt result in yet greater slaughter, and one that made no distinction between those who deserved death and those who did not. This was the curse of power, after all.

As, he well knew, Karos Invictad would soon discover.

*You fool, Invigilator. Who has turned his deadly regard upon you? Deadly, oh my, yes indeed.*

Though few might comprehend that, given the modestly handsome, thoroughly benign features surrounding that face.

*Even so, Karos Invictad. Tehol Beddict has decided that you must go.*

*And I almost pity you.*

* * *

Tehol Beddict was on his knees on the dirt floor of the hovel, rummaging through a small heap of debris, when he heard a scuffling sound at the doorway. He glanced over a shoulder. 'Ublala Pung, good evening, my friend.'

The huge half-blood Tarthenal edged into the chamber, hunching beneath the low ceiling. 'What are you doing?'

'A wooden spoon – or at least the fragment thereof. Employed in a central role in the preparation of this morning's meal. I dread the possibility that Bugg tossed it into the hearth. Ah! Here, see that? A curdle of fat remains on it!'

'Looks like dirt to me, Tehol Beddict.'

'Well, even dirt has flavour,' he replied, crawling over to the pot simmering on the hearth. 'Finally, my soup acquires subtle sumptuousness. Can you believe this, Ublala Pung? Look at me, reduced to menial chores, even unto preparing my own meals! I tell you, my manservant's head has grown too large by far. He rises above his station, does Bugg. Perhaps you could box him about the ears for me. Now, I am not as indifferent as you think – there is the glow of heightened excitement in your rather blunt, dogged features. What has happened? Has Shurq Elalle returned, then?'

'Would I be here if she had?' Ublala asked. 'No, Tehol Beddict. She is gone. Out to the seas, with all her pirated young men. I was too big, you see. I had to sleep on the deck, no matter the weather, and that was no fun –

and those pirates, they kept wanting to tie sails to me, laughing as if that was funny or something.'

'Ah well, sailors have simple minds, friend. And pirates are failed sailors, mostly, taking simpledom to profound extremes—'

'What? I have news, you know.'

'Do you now?'

'I do.'

'Can I hear it?'

'Do you want to?'

'Why yes, else I would not have asked.'

'Really want to?'

'Look, if you're not interested in telling me—'

'No, I'm interested. In telling you. That is why I'm here, although I will have some of that soup if you're offering.'

'Ublala Pung, you are most welcome to this soup, but first let me fish out this rag I fed into the broth, lest you choke or something.'

'Rag? What kind of rag?'

'Well, squarish, mostly. I believe it was used to wipe down a kitchen counter, thereby absorbing countless assorted foodstuffs.'

'Tehol Beddict, one of the pure blood has come to the city.'

'Is that your news?'

The huge man nodded solemnly.

'Pure blood?'

Another nod.

'So, a Tarthenal—'

'No,' Ublala Pung cut in. '*Pure* blood. Purer than any Tarthenal. And he carries a stone sword. On his face are the most terrifying tattoos, like a shattered tile. He is greatly scarred and countless ghosts swirl in his wake —'

'Ghosts? You could see ghosts following him around?'

'See them? Of course not. But I smelled them.'

'Really? So what do ghosts smell like? Never mind. A Tarthenal who's more Tarthenal than any Tarthenal has arrived in the city. What does he want?'

'You do not understand, Tehol Beddict. He is a champion. He is here to challenge the Emperor.'

'Oh, the poor man.'

'Yes. The poor man, but he's not a man, is he? He's a Tiste Edur.'

Tehol Beddict frowned across at Ublala Pung. 'Ah, we were speaking of two different poor men. Well, a short time earlier a runner from Rucket visited – it seems Scale House collapsed during that earthquake. But it was not your normal earthquake, such as never occurs around here anyway. Ublala Pung, there is another champion, one far more frightening than any pure blood Tarthenal. There is great consternation among the Rat Catchers, all of whom seem to know more than they're letting on. The view seems to be that this time the Emperor's search has drawn in a most deadly haul.'

'Well, I don't know nothing about that,' Ublala Pung said, rubbing thoughtfully at the bristle on his chin. 'Only, this pure blood has a stone sword. Chipped, like those old spear-points people are selling in the Downs Market. It's almost as tall as he is, and he's taller than me. I saw him pick up a Letherii guard and throw him away.'

'Throw him away?'

'Like a small sack of . . . of mushrooms or something.'

'So his temper is even worse than yours, then.'

'Pure bloods know no fear.'

'Right. So how is it you know about pure bloods?'

'The Sereghal. Our gods, the ones I helped to kill, they were fallen pure bloods. Cast out.'

'So the one who has just arrived, he's the equivalent of one of your gods, Ublala Pung? Please, don't tell me you're planning on trying to kill him. I mean, he has a stone sword and all.'

'Kill him? No, you don't understand, Tehol Beddict. This one, this pure blood, he is worthy of true worship. Not the way we appeased the Sereghal – that was to keep them away. Wait and see, wait and see what is going to happen. My kin will gather, once the word spreads. They will gather.'

'What if the Emperor kills him?'

Ublala Pung simply shook his head.

They both looked over as Bugg appeared in the doorway, in his arms the body of a naked woman.

'Now really,' Tehol said, 'the pot's not nearly big enough. Besides, hungry as I am, there are limits and eating academics far exceeds them—'

The manservant frowned. 'You recognize this woman?'

'I do, from my former life, replete as it was with stern tutors and the occasional subjects of youthful crushes and the like. Alas, she looks much worse for wear. I had always heard that the world of scholars was cut-throat – what debate on nuances resulted in this, I wonder?'

Bugg carried her over and set her down on his own sleeping pallet.

As the manservant stepped back, Ublala Pung stepped close and struck Bugg in the side of the head, hard enough to send the old man reeling against a wall.

'Wait!' Tehol shouted to the giant. 'No more!'

Rubbing at his temple, Bugg blinked up at Ublala Pung. 'What was that all about?' he demanded.

'Tehol said—'

'Never mind what I said, Ublala. It was but a passing thought, a musing devoid of substance, a careless utterance disconnected in every way from physical action. Never intended—'

'You said he needed boxing about the head, Tehol Beddict. You asked me – because it'd got bigger or something, so I needed to puncture it so it'd get smaller again. It didn't look any bigger to me. But that's what you said. He was above his situation, you said—'

'Station, not situation. My point is – both of you – stop looking at me like that. My point was, I was but voicing a few minor complaints of a domestic nature here. Not once suspecting that Ublala Pung would take me so literally.'

'Master, he *is* Ublala Pung.'

'I know, I know. Clearly, all the once-finely honed edges of my intellect have worn off of late.' Then his expression brightened. 'But now I have a tutor!'

'A victim of the Patriotists,' Bugg said, eyeing Ublala askance as he made his way over to the pot on the hearth. 'Abyss below, Master, this barely passes as muddy water.'

'Aye, alas, in dire need of your culinary magic. The Patriotists? You broke her out of prison?'

'In a manner of speaking. I do not anticipate a city-wide manhunt, however. She was to have been one of the ones who simply vanished.'

Ublala Pung grunted a laugh. 'They'd never find her if it was a manhunt.'

The other two men looked across at him.

The half-blood Tarthenal gestured at the obvious. 'Look, she's got breasts and stuff.'

Bugg's tone was soft as he said to Tehol, 'She needs gentle healing, Master. And peace.'

'Well, no better refuge from the dreads of the world than Tehol Beddict's abode.'

'A manhunt.' Ublala laughed again, then shook his head. 'Them Patriotists are idiots.'

# CHAPTER EIGHT

When stone is water, time is ice.
When all is frozen in place fates rain down in fell torrent.

My face revealed, in this stone that is water.
The ripples locked hard to its shape a countenance passing strange.

Ages will hide when stone is water.
Cycles bound in these depths are flawed illusions breaking the stream.

When stone is water, time is ice.
When all is frozen in place our lives are stones in the torrent.

And we rain down, rain down
like water on stone
with every strike of the hand.

*Water and Stone*
Elder Fent

The Realm of Shadow was home to brutal places, yet not one could match the brutality of shadows upon the soul. Such thoughts haunted Cotillion these days. He stood on a rise, before him a gentle, elongated slope reaching down to a lake's placid waters. A makeshift camp was visible on a level terrace forty paces to his left, a single longhouse flanked by half-buried outbuildings, including stable and coop. The entire arrangement – fortunately unoccupied at the time, excepting a dozen hens and a rooster, one irritated rook with a gimp leg and two milk cows – had been stolen from another realm, captured by some vagary of happenstance, or, more likely, the consequence of the breaking of mysterious laws, as seemed to occur sporadically during Shadow Realm's endless migration.

However it had arrived, Shadowthrone learned of it in time to despatch a flurry of wraiths to lay claim to the buildings and livestock, saving them from predation by roving demons or, indeed, one of the Hounds.

Following the disaster at the First Throne, the score of survivors had been delivered to this place, to wander and wonder at the strange artifacts left by the previous inhabitants: the curved wooden prows surmounting the peaks of the longhouse with their intricate, serpentine carvings; the mysterious totemic jewellery, mostly of silver although amber seemed common as well; the bolts of cloth, wool both coarse and fine; wooden bowls and cups of hammered bronze. Wandering through it all, dazed, a blankness in their eyes . . .

*Recovering.*

*As if such a thing is possible.*

Off to his right, a lone cape-shrouded figure stood at the water's edge, motionless, seeming to stare out on the unmarred expanse of the lake. There was nothing normal to this lake, Cotillion knew, although the scene it presented from this section of the shore was deceptively serene. Barring the lack of birds. And the absence of molluscs, crustaceans or even insects.

Every scrap of food to feed the livestock – and the miserable rook – was brought in by the wraiths Shadowthrone had assigned to the task. For all of that, the rooster had died mere days after arriving. *Died from grief, I expect. Not a single dawn to crow awake*.

He could hear voices from somewhere just beyond the longhouse. Panek, Aystar and the other surviving children – well, hardly children any more. They'd seen battle, they'd seen their friends die, they knew the world – every world – was an unpleasant place where a human's life was not worth much. They knew, too, what it meant to be used.

Further down the beach, well past the lone hooded figure, walked Trull Sengar and the T'lan Imass, Onrack the Broken. Like an artist with his deathless muse, or perhaps at his shoulder a critic of ghastly mien. An odd friendship, that one. But then, T'lan Imass were full of surprises.

Sighing, Cotillion set off down the slope.

The hooded head half turned at his approach. A face the hue of burnished leather, eyes dark beneath the felted wool rim of the hood. 'Have you come with the key, Cotillion?'

'Quick Ben, it is good to see that you have recovered.'

'More or less.'

'What key?'

The flash of a humourless smile. 'The one that sets me free.'

Cotillion stood beside the wizard and studied the murky expanse of water. 'I would imagine that you could leave here at any time. You are a High Mage, with more than one warren at your disposal. Force a gate, then walk through it.'

'Do you take me for a fool?' Quick Ben asked in a quiet voice. 'This damned realm is wandering. There's no telling where I would come out, although if I guess correctly, I would be in for a long swim.'

'Ah. Well, I'm afraid I pay little attention to such things these days. We are crossing an ocean, then?'

'So I suspect.'

'Then indeed, to journey anywhere you require our help.'

The wizard shot him a glance. 'As I thought. You have created pathways, gates with fixed exits. How did you manage that, Cotillion?'

'Oh, not our doing, I assure you. We simply stumbled onto them, in a manner of speaking.'

'The Azath.'

'Very good. You always were sharp, Ben Delat.'

A grunt. 'I've not used that version of my name in a long time.'

'Oh? When was the last time – do you recall?'

'These Azath,' Quick Ben said, clearly ignoring the question. 'The House of Shadow itself, here in this realm, correct? Somehow, it has usurped the gate, the original gate. Kurald Emurlahn. The House exists both as a cast shadow and as its true physical manifestation. No distinction can be made between the two. A nexus . . . but that is not unusual for Azath constructs, is it? What is, however, is that the gate to Kurald Emurlahn was vulnerable in the first place, to such a usurpation.'

'Necessity, I expect,' said Cotillion, frowning at seeing a slow sweep of broad ripples approach the shore, their source somewhere further out. *Not at all what it seems . . .*

'What do you mean?'

The god shrugged. 'The realm was shattered. Dying.'

'The Azath participated in healing the fragments? Intentional? By design, by intellect? Or in the manner that blood dries to create a scab? Is the Azath nothing more than some kind of natural immune system, such as our bodies unleash to fight illness?'

'The breadth of your scholarly knowledge is impressive, Quick Ben.'

'Never mind that. The warrens were K'rul's supreme sacrifice – his own flesh, his own blood. But not the *Elder* Warrens – or so we are to believe. Whose veins were opened to create those, Cotillion?'

'I wish I knew. No, rather, I don't. I doubt it is relevant, in any case. Does the Azath simply respond to damage, or is there a guiding intelligence behind its actions? I cannot answer you. I doubt anyone can. Does it even matter?'

'I don't know, to be honest. But not knowing makes me nervous.'

'I have a key for you,' Cotillion said after a moment. Trull Sengar and Onrack were now walking towards them. 'For the three of you, in fact. If you want it.'

'here's a choice?'

'Not for them,' Cotillion said, nodding in the direction of Trull and the T'lan Imass. 'And they could use your help.'

'The same was true of Kalam Mekhar,' Quick Ben said. 'Not to mention Adjunct Tavore.'

'They survived,' Cotillion replied.

'You cannot be sure, though – not with Kalam. You can't be entirely sure, can you?'

'He was alive when the Deadhouse took him.'

'So Shadowthrone claims.'

'He would not lie.'

The wizard barked a bitter laugh.

'Kalam still lives, Quick Ben. The Deadhouse has him, beyond the reach of time itself. Yet he will heal. The poison will degrade, become inert. Shadowthrone saved the assassin's life—'

'Why?'

'Now that is a harder question to answer,' Cotillion admitted. 'Perhaps simply to defy Laseen, and you should not be surprised if that is his only reason. Believe me, for Shadowthrone, it suffices.' *Be glad, Ben Adaephon Delat, that I do not tell you his real reason*.

Trull Sengar and Onrack drew close, then halted. The Tiste Edur's new stone-tipped spear was strapped to his back; he was wearing a long cape against the chill, the wool dyed deep burgundy – one of the more useful treasures found in the longhouse. It was held in place by an exquisite silver brooch depicting some sort of stylized hammer. At his side, Onrack the Broken's skeletal frame was so battered, dented and fractured it was a wonder that the warrior was still in one piece.

The T'lan Imass spoke. 'This lake, god. The shore opposite . . .'

'What of it?'

'It does not exist.'

Cotillion nodded.

Trull Sengar asked, 'How can that be? Onrack says it's not a gate, on the other side. It's not anything at all.'

Cotillion ran a hand through his hair, then scratched his chin – realizing he needed to shave – and squinted out on the water. 'The other side is . . . unresolved.'

'What does that mean?' Quick Ben demanded.

'To fully understand, you will have to go there, wizard. The three of you – that is the path of your journey. And you must leave soon.'

'Forgive us for being unimpressed,' the Tiste Edur said drily. 'The last nightmare you sent us into has made us rather reluctant adventurers. We need a better reason, Cotillion.'

'I imagine you do.'

'We're waiting,' Quick Ben said, crossing his arms.

'Alas, I cannot help you. Any explanation I attempt will affect your perception of what you will find, at your journey's end. And that must not be allowed to happen, because the manner in which you perceive will shape and indeed define the reality that awaits you.' He sighed again. 'I know, that's not very helpful.'

'Then summon Shadowthrone,' Trull Sengar said. 'Maybe he can do better.'

Cotillion shrugged, then nodded.

A dozen heartbeats later a mostly formless shadow rose in their midst, from which emerged a knobby cane at the end of a skinny, gnarled arm. The god glanced about, then down, to find itself ankle-deep in water. Hissing, Shadowthrone picked up the tattered ends of his cloak then pranced onto dry land. 'Oh, wasn't that amusing?' he sang. 'Wretches, all of you. What do you want? I'm busy. Do you understand? Busy.'

Onrack pointed one skeletal arm out towards the lake. 'Cotillion would send us across this water, on a mission he will not explain, to achieve goals he refuses to define, in a place he cannot describe. We therefore call upon you, formless one, to deliver what he will not.'

Shadowthrone giggled.

Cotillion glanced away, suspecting what was coming.

'Delighted to, bony one. I respond in this manner. It is as Cotillion believes. The rooster died of grief.'

A curse from Quick Ben as Shadowthrone then swirled into nothingness.

Cotillion turned away. 'Supplies await you outside the longhouse. When you return down here, a boat will have been readied. Make your goodbyes to Minala and the children as brief as possible. The way ahead is long and arduous, and we are running out of time.'

The *Undying Gratitude* heeled hard to starboard, the gale bitter with the cold reek of ice. Pulling and half climbing his way across the aft deck as the crew struggled against the sudden onslaught, First Mate Skorgen Kaban reached the pilot station where Shurq Elalle, held in place by a leather harness, stood with legs planted wide.

She seemed impervious to the plunging temperature, with not even a hint of colour slapped to her cheeks by the buffeting wind. An uncanny woman indeed. Uncanny, insatiable, unearthly, she was like a sea goddess of old, a glamoured succubus luring them all to their doom – but no, that was not a good thought, not now, not ever. Or at least for as long as he sailed with her.

'Captain! It's going to be close – them mountains of ice are closin' on the cut, maybe faster than we are! Where in the Errant's name did they come from?'

'We'll make it,' Shurq Elalle asserted. 'Come round into the lee of the island – it's the northwest shore that's going to get hammered. I'd be amazed if the citadel's walls on that side survive what's coming. Look at the Reach, Pretty, it's nothing but fangs of ice – wherever all this has come from, it's devouring the entire coast.'

'Damned cold, is what it is,' Skorgen said in a growl. 'Maybe we should turn round, Captain. That fleet never came after us anyway – we could head for Lether Mouth—' 'And starve before we're halfway there. No, Pretty, Second Maiden Fort's an independent state now, and I'm finding that rather appealing. Besides, I'm curious. Aren't you?'

'Not enough to risk getting crushed by them white jaws, Captain.'

'We'll make it.'

The foment that was the crest of the heaving bergs was the colour of old leather, shredded by the churning fragments of ice, tree roots, shattered trunks and huge broken rocks that seemed to defy the pull to the deep – at least for long enough to appear atop the water, like the leading edge of a slide, rolling on across the surface of the tumult before reluctantly vanishing into the depths.

Tumbling out from this surge like rotted curtains was fog, plucked and torn by the ferocious winds, and Shurq Elalle, facing astern, watched as the maelstrom heaved in their wake. It was gaining, but not fast enough; they were moments from rounding the isle's rocky headland, which looked to be formidable enough to shunt the ice aside, down its length.

At least, she hoped so. If not, then Second Maiden's harbour was doomed. *And so is my ship and crew.* As for herself, well, if she managed to avoid being crushed or frozen in place, she could probably work her way clear, maybe even clamber aboard for the long ride to the mainland's coast.

*It won't come to that. Islands don't get pushed around. Buried, possibly, but then Fent Reach is where it's all piling up – what's chasing us here is just an outer arm, and before long it'll be fighting the tide. Errant fend, imagine what happened to the Edur homeland – that entire coast must have been chewed to pieces – or swallowed up entire. So what broke up the dam, that's what I want to know.*

Groaning, the *Undying Gratitude* rounded the point, the wind quickly dropping off as the ship settled and began its crawl into the high-walled harbour. A prison island indeed – all the evidence remained: the massive fortifications, the towers with lines of sight and fire arcs facing both to sea

and inland. Huge ballistae, mangonels and scorpions mounted on every available space, and in the harbour itself rock-pile islands held miniature forts festooned with signal flags, fast ten-man pursuit galleys moored alongside.

A dozen ships rode at anchor in the choppy waters. Along the docks, she saw, tiny figures were racing in every direction, like ants on a kicked nest. 'Pretty, have us drop anchor other side of that odd-looking dromon. Seems like nobody's going to pay us much attention – hear that roar? That's the northwest shore getting hit.'

'The whole damned island could go under, Captain.'

'That's why we're staying aboard – to see what happens. If we have to run east, I want us ready to do so.'

'Look, there's a harbour scow comin' our way.'

*Damn*. 'Typical. World's falling in but that don't stop the fee-takers. All right, prepare to receive them.'

The anchor had rattled down by the time the scow fought its way alongside. Two officious-looking women climbed aboard, one tall, the other short. The latter spoke first. 'Who's the captain here and where d'you hail from?'

'I am Captain Shurq Elalle. We've come up from Letheras. Twenty months at sea with a hold full of goods.'

The tall woman, thin, pale, with stringy blonde hair, smiled. 'Very accommodating of you, dear. Now, if you'll be so kind, Brevity here will head down into the hold to inspect the cargo.'

The short dark-haired woman, Brevity, then said, 'And Pithy here will collect the anchoring fee.'

'Fifteen docks a day.'

'That's a little steep!'

'Well,' Pithy said with a lopsided shrug, 'it's looking like the harbour's days are numbered. We'd best get what we can.'

Brevity was frowning at Shurq's first mate. 'You wouldn't be Skorgen Kaban the Pretty, would you?'

'Aye, that's me.'

'I happen to have your lost eye, Skorgen. In a jar.'

The man scowled across at Shurq Elalle, then said, 'You and about fifty other people.'

'What? But I paid good money for that! How many people lose an eye sneezing? By the Errant, you're famous!'

'Sneeze is it? That's what you heard? And you believed it? Spirits of the deep, lass, and you paid the crook how much?'

Shurq said to Pithy, 'You and your friend here are welcome to inspect the cargo – but if we're not offloading that's as far as it goes, and whether we offload or not depends on the kinds of prices your buyers are prepared to offer.'

'I'll prove it to you,' Brevity said, advancing on Skorgen Kaban. 'It's a match all right – I can tell from here.'

'Can't be a match,' the first mate replied. 'The eye I lost was a different colour from this one.'

'You had different-coloured eyes?'

'That's right.'

'That's a curse among sailors.'

'Maybe that's why it ain't there no more.' Skorgen nodded towards the nearby dromon. 'Where's that hailing from? I never seen lines like those before – looks like it's seen a scrap or two, asides.'

Brevity shrugged. 'Foreigners. We get a few—'

'No more of that,' Pithy cut in. 'Check the cargo, dearie. Time's a-wasting.'

Shurq Elalle turned and examined the foreign ship with more intensity after that peculiar exchange. The dromon looked damned weather-beaten, she decided, but her first mate's lone eye had been sharp – the ship had been in a battle, one involving sorcery. Black, charred streaks latticed the hull like a painted web. *A whole lot of sorcery. That ship should be kindling.*

'Listen,' Pithy said, facing inland. 'They beat it back, like they said they would.'

The cataclysm in the making seemed to be dying a rapid death, there on the other side of the island where clouds of ice crystals billowed skyward. Shurq Elalle twisted round to look out to the sea to the south, past the promontory. Ice, looking like a massive frozen lake, was piling up in the wake of the violent vanguard that had come so close to wrecking the *Undying Gratitude*. But its energy was fast dissipating. A gust of warm wind backed across the deck.

Skorgen Kaban grunted. 'And how many sacrifices did they fling off the cliff to earn this appeasement?' He laughed. 'Then again, you probably got no shortage of prisoners!'

'There are no prisoners on this island,' Pithy said, assuming a lofty expression as she crossed her arms. 'In any case, you ignorant oaf, blood sacrifices wouldn't have helped – it's just ice, after all. The vast sheets up north went and broke to pieces – why, just a week past and we was sweating uncommon here, and that's not something we ever get on Second Maiden. I should know, I was born here.'

'Born to prisoners?'

'You didn't hear me, Skorgen Kaban? No prisoners on this island—'

'Not since you ousted your jailers, you mean.'

'Enough of that,' Shurq Elalle said, seeing the woman's umbrage ratchet up a few more notches on the old hoist pole – and it was plenty high enough already. 'Second Maiden is now independent, and for that I have boundless admiration. Tell me, how many Edur ships assailed your island in the invasion?'

Pithy snorted. 'They took one look at the fortifications, and one sniff at the mages we'd let loose on the walls, and went right round us.'

The captain's brows rose a fraction. 'I had heard there was a fight.'

'There was, when our glorious liberation was declared. Following the terrible accidents befalling the warden and her cronies.'

'Accidents, hah! That's a good one.'

Shurq Elalle glared across at her first mate, but like most men he was impervious to such non-verbal warnings.

'I will take that fifteen docks now,' Pithy said, her tone cold. 'Plus the five docks disembarking fee, assuming you intend to come ashore to take on supplies or sell your cargo, or both.'

'You ain't never mentioned five—'

'Pretty,' Shurq Elalle interrupted, 'head below and check on Brevity – she may have questions regarding our goods.'

'Aye, Captain.' With a final glower at Pithy he stumped off for the hatch.

Pithy squinted at Shurq Elalle for a moment, then scanned the various sailors in sight. 'You're pirates.'

'Don't be absurd. We're independent traders. You have no prisoners on your island, I have no pirates on my ship.'

'What are you suggesting by that statement?'

'Clearly, if I had been suggesting anything, it was lost on you. I take it you are not the harbour master, just a tolltaker.' She turned as first Skorgen then Brevity emerged onto the deck. The short woman's eyes were bright.

'Pithy, they got stuff!'

'Now there's a succinct report,' Shurq Elalle said. 'Brevity, be sure to inform the harbour master that we wish a berth at one of the stone piers, to better effect unloading our cargo. A messenger out to potential buyers might also prove . . . rewarding.' She glanced at Pithy, then away, as she

added, 'As for mooring and landing fees, I will settle up with the harbour master directly, once I have negotiated the master's commission.'

'You think you're smart,' Pithy snapped. 'I should have brought a squad with me – how would you have liked that, Captain? Poking in here and there, giving things a real look. How would you like that?'

'Brevity, who rules Second Maiden?' Shurq Elalle asked.

'Shake Brullyg, Captain. He's Grand Master of the Putative Assembly.'

'The Putative Assembly? Are you sure you have the right word there, lass? Putative?'

'That's what I said. That's right, isn't it, Pithy?'

'The captain thinks she's smart, but she's not so smart, is she? Wait until she meets Shake Brullyg, then won't she be surprised—'

'Not really,' Shurq said. 'I happen to know Shake Brullyg. I even know the crime for which he was sent away. The only surprise is that he's still alive.'

'Nobody kills Shake Brullyg easily,' Pithy said.

One of the crew burst into a laugh that he quickly converted into a cough.

'We'll await the harbour master's response,' Shurq Elalle said.

Pithy and Brevity returned to their scow, the former taking the oars.

'Strange women,' Skorgen Kaban muttered as they watched the wallowing craft pull away.

'An island full of inbred prisoners,' Shurq replied in a murmur. 'Are you at all surprised, Pretty? And if that's not enough, a full-blooded Shake – who just happens to be completely mad – is ruling the roost. I tell you this, our stay should be interesting.'

'I hate interesting.'

'And probably profitable.'

'Oh, good. I like profitable. I can swallow interesting so long as it's profitable.'

'Get the hands ready to ship the anchor. I doubt we'll have to wait overlong for the harbour master's signal flag.'

'Aye, Captain.'

Udinaas sat watching her clean and oil her sword. An Edur sword, set into her hands by a Tiste Edur warrior. All she needed now was a house so she could bury the damned thing. Oh yes, and the future husband's fateful return. Now, maybe nothing was meant by it; just a helpful gesture by one of Fear's brothers – the only Sengar brother Udinaas actually respected. Maybe, but maybe not.

The interminable chanting droned through the stone walls, a sound even grimmer than the blunt grunting of Edur women at mourning. The Onyx Wizards were in consultation. If such an assertion held any truth then the priestly version of their language was incomprehensible and devoid of the rhythm normally found in both song and speech. And if it was nothing but chanting, then the old fools could not even agree on the tempo.

And he had thought the Tiste Edur strange. They were nothing compared to these Tiste Andii, who had carried dour regard to unhuman extremes.

It was no wonder, though. The Andara was a crumbling blackstone edifice at the base of a refuse-cluttered gorge. As isolated as a prison. The cliff walls were honeycombed with caves, pocked with irregular chambers, like giant burst bubbles along the course of winding tunnels. There were bottomless pits, dead ends, passages so steep they could not be traversed without rope ladders. Hollowed-out towers rose like inverted spires through solid bedrock; while over subterranean chasms arched narrow bridges of white pumice, carved into amorphous shapes and set without mortar. In one place there was a lake of hardened lava, smoother than wind-polished ice, the obsidian streaked with red, and this was the Amass Chamber, where the entire population could gather – barefooted – to witness the endless wrangling of the Reve Masters, otherwise known as the Onyx Wizards.

Master of the Rock, of the Air, of the Root, of the Dark Water, of the Night. Five wizards in all, squabbling over orders of procession, hierarchies of propitiation, proper hem-length of the Onyx robes and Errant knew what else. With these half-mad neurotics any burr in the cloth became a mass of wrinkles and creases.

From what Udinaas had come to understand, no more than fourteen of the half-thousand or so denizens – beyond the wizards themselves – were pure Tiste Andii, and of those, only three had ever seen daylight – which they quaintly called the *blinded stars* – only three had ever climbed to the world above.

No wonder they'd all lost their minds.

'Why is it,' Udinaas said, 'when some people laugh it sounds more like crying?'

Seren Pedac glanced up from the sword bridging her knees, the oil-stained cloth in her long-fingered hands. 'I don't hear anyone laughing. Or crying.'

'I didn't necessarily mean out loud,' he replied.

A snort from Fear Sengar, where he sat on a stone bench near the portal way. 'Boredom is stealing the last fragments of sanity in your mind, slave. I for one will not miss them.'

'The wizards and Silchas are probably arguing the manner of your execution, Fear Sengar,' Udinaas said. 'You are their most hated enemy, after all. Child of the Betrayer, spawn of lies and all that. It suits your grand quest, for the moment at least, doesn't it? Into the viper's den – every hero needs to do that, right? And moments before your doom arrives, out hisses your enchanted sword and evil minions die by the score. Ever wondered what the aftermath of such slaughter must be? Dread depopulation, shattered families, wailing babes – and should that crucial threshold be crossed, then inevitable extinction is assured, hovering before them like a grisly spectre. Oh yes, I heard my share when I was a child, of epic tales and poems and all the rest. But I always started worrying . . . about those evil minions, the victims of those bright heroes and their intractable righteousness. I mean, someone invades your hide-out, your cherished

home, and of course you try to kill and eat them. Who wouldn't? There they were, nominally ugly and shifty-looking, busy with their own little lives, plaiting nooses or some such thing. Then shock! The alarms are raised! The intruders have somehow slipped their chains and death is a whirlwind in every corridor!'

Seren Pedac sheathed the sword. 'I think I would like to hear your version of such stories, Udinaas. How you would like them to turn out. At the very least, it will pass the time.'

'I'd rather not singe Kettle's innocent ears—'

'She's asleep. Something she does a lot of these days.'

'Perhaps she's ill.'

'Perhaps she knows how to wait things out,' the Acquitor responded. 'Go on, Udinaas, how does the heroic epic of yours, your revised version, turn out?'

'Well, first, the hidden lair of the evil ones. There's a crisis brewing. Their priorities got all mixed up – some past evil ruler with no management skills or something. So, they've got dungeons and ingenious but ultimately ineffective torture devices. They have steaming chambers with huge cauldrons, awaiting human flesh to sweeten the pot – but alas, nobody's been by of late. After all, the lair is reputedly cursed, a place whence no adventurer ever returns – all dubious propaganda, of course. In fact, the lair's a good market for the local woodcutters and the pitch-sloppers – huge hearths and torches and murky oil lamps – that's the problem with underground lairs – they're dark. Worse than that, everyone's been sharing a cold for the past eight hundred years. Anyway, even an evil lair needs the necessities of reasonable existence. Vegetables, bushels of berries, spices and medicines, cloth and pottery, hides and well-gnawed leather, evil-looking hats. Of course I've not even mentioned all the weapons and intimidating uniforms.'

'You have stumbled from your narrative trail, Udinaas,' Seren Pedac observed.

'So I have, and that too is an essential point. Life is like that. We stumble astray. Just like those evil minions. A crisis – no new prisoners, no fresh meat. Children are starving. It's an unmitigated disaster.'

'What's the solution?'

'Why, they invent a story. A magical item in their possession, something to lure fools into the lair. It's reasonable, if you consider it. Every hook needs a wriggling worm. And then they choose one among them to play the role of the Insane Master, the one seeking to unlock the dire powers of that magical item and so bring about a utopia of animated corpses stumbling through a realm of ash and rejected tailings. Now, if this doesn't bring heroes in by the drove, nothing will.'

'Do they succeed?'

'For a time, but recall those ill-conceived torture implements. Invariably, some enterprising and lucky fool gets free, then crushes the skull of a dozing guard or three, and mayhem is let loose. Endless slaughter – hundreds, then thousands of untrained evil warriors who forgot to sharpen their swords and never mind the birch-bark shields that woodcutter with the hump sold them.'

Even Fear Sengar grunted a laugh at that. 'All right, Udinaas, you win. I think I prefer your version after all.'

Udinaas, surprised into silence, stared across at Seren Pedac, who smiled and said, 'You have revealed your true talent, Udinaas. So the hero wins free. Then what?'

'The hero does nothing of the sort. Instead, the hero catches a chill down in those dank tunnels. Makes it out alive, however, and retreats to a nearby city, where the plague he carries spreads and kills everyone. And for thousands of years thereafter, that hero's name is a curse to both people living above ground and those below.'

After a moment, Fear spoke. 'Ah, even your version has an implicit warning, slave. And this is what you would have me heed, but that leads me to wonder – what do you care for my fate? You call me your enemy, your

lifelong foe, for all the injustices my people have delivered upon you. Do you truly wish me to take note of your message?'

'As you like, Edur,' Udinaas replied, 'but my faith runs deeper than you imagine, and on an entirely different course from what you clearly think. I said the hero wins clear, at least momentarily, but I mentioned nothing of his hapless followers, his brave companions.'

'All of whom died in the lair.'

'Not at all. In the aftermath there was dire need for new blood. They were one and all adopted by the evil ones, who were only evil in a relative sense, being sickly and miserable and hungry and not too bright. In any case, there was a great renaissance in the lair's culture, producing the finest art and treasures the world had ever seen.'

'And what happened then?' Seren asked.

'It lasted until a new hero arrived, but that's another tale for another time. I have talked myself hoarse.'

'Among the women of the Tiste Edur,' Fear Sengar said then, 'is told the tale that Father Shadow, Scabandari Bloodeye, chose of his own free will to die, freeing his soul to journey down the Grey Road, a journey in search of absolution, for such was the guilt of what he had done on the plains of the Kechra.'

'Now that is a convenient version.'

'Now it is you who lack subtlety, Udinaas. This alternative interpretation is itself allegorical, for what it truly represents is *our* guilt. For Scabandari's crime. We cannot take back the deeds of Father Shadow; nor were we in any position, ever, to gainsay him. He led, the Edur followed. Could we have defied him? Possibly. But not likely. As such, we are left with a guilt that cannot be appeased, except in an allegorical sense. And so we hold to legends of redemption.'

Seren Pedac rose and walked over to set her scabbarded sword down beside the food pack. 'Yet this was a tale held in private by the women of your tribes, Fear. Setting aside for the moment the curious fact that you

know of it, how is it the promise of redemption belongs only to the women?'

'The warriors follow another path,' Fear replied. 'That I know of the story – and the truth of Scabandari – is due to my mother, who rejected the tradition of secrecy. Uruth does not flee knowledge, and she would her sons do not either—'

'Then how do you explain Rhulad?' Udinaas asked.

'Do not bait him,' Seren Pedac said to the slave. 'Rhulad is accursed. By the sword in his hand, by the god who made that sword.'

'Rhulad was young,' Fear said, unconsciously wringing his hands as he stared at the chamber's worn floor. 'There was so much still to teach him. He sought to become a great warrior, a heroic warrior. He was discomfited in the shadows of his three older brothers, and this made him precipitate.'

'I think the god chose him . . . over Hannan Mosag,' said Udinaas. 'Rhulad had no choice.'

Fear studied Udinaas for a long moment, then he nodded. 'If that is your belief, then you are far more generous towards Rhulad than any Tiste Edur. Again and again, Udinaas, you leave me unbalanced.'

Udinaas closed his eyes as he leaned back against the rough wall. 'He spoke to me, Fear, because I listened. Something the rest of you never bothered doing – which isn't that surprising, since your vaunted family order had just been shattered. Your precious hierarchy was in disarray. Shocking. Terrible. So, while he could not speak to you, you in turn were unwilling to hear him. He was silent and you were deaf to that silence. A typical mess – I don't regret having no family.'

'You lay all the blame at the foot of the chaotic god.'

Udinaas opened his eyes, blinked for a moment, then smiled. 'Too convenient by far. Now, if I was seeking redemption, I'd leap on the back of that one, and ride the beast all the way – to the cliff 's edge, then right over, amen.'

'Then . . . what?'

'What to blame? Well, how should I know? I'm just a worn-out slave. But if I had to guess, I'd look first at that rigid hierarchy I mentioned earlier. It traps everyone, and everyone makes sure it traps everyone else. Until none of you can move, not side to side, not up either. You can move down, of course – just do something no-one else likes. Disapproval kicks out every rung of the ladder, and down you go.'

'So it is the way of living among the Tiste Edur.' Fear snorted, looked away.

'All right,' Udinaas said, sighing, 'let me ask you this. Why wasn't that sword offered to some Letherii – a brilliant officer of an army, a cold-blooded merchant prince? Why not Ezgara himself? Or better still, his son, Quillas? Now there was ambition and stupidity in perfect balance. And if not a Letherii, then why not a Nerek shaman? Or a Fent or a Tarthenal? Of course, all those others, well, those tribes were mostly obliterated – at least, all the taboos, traditions and rules of every sort that kept people in line – all gone, thanks to the Letherii.'

'Very well,' Seren Pedac said, 'why not a Letherii?'

Udinaas shrugged. 'The wrong fatal flaws, obviously. The Chained One recognized the absolute perfection of the Tiste Edur – their politics, their history, their culture and their political situation.'

'Now I understand,' Fear murmured, his arms crossed.

'Understand what?'

'Why Rhulad so valued you, Udinaas. You were wasted scraping fish scales all day when by the measure of your intelligence and your vision, you could sit tall on any kingdom's throne.'

The slave's grin was hard with malice. 'Damn you, Fear Sengar.'

'How did that offend you?'

'You just stated the central argument – both for and against the institution of slavery. I was wasted, was I? Or of necessity kept under firm heel. Too

many people like me on the loose and no ruler, tyrant or otherwise, could sit assured on a throne. We would stir things up, again and again. We would challenge, we would protest, we would defy. By being enlightened, we would cause utter mayhem. So, Fear, kick another basket of fish over here, it's better for everyone.'

'Except you.'

'No, even me. This way, all my brilliance remains ineffectual, harmless to anyone and therefore especially to myself, lest my lofty ideas loose a torrent of blood.'

Seren Pedac grunted, 'You are frightened by your own ideas, Udinaas?'

'All the time, Acquitor. Aren't you?'

She said nothing.

'Listen,' Fear said. 'The chanting has stopped.'

As usual, the debate ended with everyone losing. The clash of intractable views produced no harmony, just exhaustion and an ache in the back of the skull. Clip, seated with his legs propped up on the back of the next lower bench, in the gloom of the uppermost tier overlooking the absurdly named Disc of Concordance on which stood five glowering Onyx Wizards, struggled to awaken his mind as the wizards turned as one to face Silchas Ruin.

Ordant Brid, Reve of the Rock, who had sent Clip to retrieve these fell wanderers, was the first to speak. 'Silchas Ruin, brother of blood to our Black-Winged Lord, we know what you seek.'

'Then you also know not to get in my way.'

At these cold words, Clip sat straighter.

'It is as I warned!' cried Rin Varalath, Reve of the Night, in his high-pitched, grating voice. 'He arrives like a leviathan of destruction! Which of the brothers was gifted the greater share of deliberation and wisdom? Well, the answer is clear!'

'Calm down,' said Penith Vinandas.

Clip smiled to himself, wondering yet again if the Reve aspects created the personalities of their masters – or, in the case of Penith, mistress – or was it the other way round? Of course the Mistress of the Root would advise calm, a settling of wild wills, for she was so assuredly . . . *rooted*.

'I am calm!' snarled Rin Varalath. He jabbed a finger at Silchas Ruin. 'We must not yield to this one, else all that we have achieved will be brought down upon our very heads. The balance is all that keeps us alive, and each of you knows that. And if you do not, then you are more lost than I ever imagined.'

Draxos Hulch, Reve of the Dark Water, spoke in his depthless baritone. 'The issue, my fellow wizards, is less open to debate than you would hope. Unless, of course, we can explain to this warrior the nature of our struggle and the uneasy balance we have but recently won.'

'Why should he be interested?' Rin Varalath asked. 'If this all collapses it is nothing to him. He will move on, uncaring – our deaths will be meaningless as far as he is concerned.'

Silchas Ruin sighed. 'I am not insensitive to the battle you have waged here, wizards. But your success is due entirely to the inevitable disintegration of the Jaghut's ritual.' He scanned the faces before him. 'You are no match for Omtose Phellack, when its wielder was none other than Gothos. In any case, the balance you believe you have achieved is illusory. The ritual fails. Ice, which had been held in check, held timeless, has begun to move once more. It falters in the warmth of this age, yet its volume is so vast that, even melted, it will effect vast change. As for the glaciers bound in the highest reaches of the mountains of Bluerose – those to the north – well, they have already begun their migration. Unmindful of the distant ocean's assault, they draw power from a wayward flow of cold air. These glaciers, wizards, still hold the spear of the ritual, and soon it will drive for your heart. The Andara is doomed.'

'We care nothing for the Andara,' said Gestallin Aros, Reve of the Air. 'The balance you speak of is not the one that matters to us. Silchas Ruin, the

Jaghut's ritual was of ice only in the manner that fire is of wood – it was the means of achieving a specific goal, and that goal was the freezing in place of time. Of life, and of death.'

Clip's gaze narrowed on Silchas Ruin, as the albino Andii slowly cocked his head, then said, 'You speak of a different failing, yet the two are linked —'

'We are aware of that,' cut in Ordant Brid. Then, with a faint smile, 'Perhaps more so than you. You speak of a spear of ice, of Omtose Phellack's very core, still living, still powerful. That spear, Silchas Ruin, casts a shadow, and it is within that shadow that you will find what you seek. Although not, I think, in the way you desire.'

'Explain.'

'We will not,' snapped Rin Varalath. 'If you wish to understand, then look to your kin.'

'My kin? Are you then able to summon Anomander?'

'Not him,' replied Ordant Brid. He hesitated, then continued. 'We were visited, not so long ago, by an ascendant. Menandore. Sister Dawn—'

If anything, Ruin's voice grew even colder as he demanded, 'What has she to do with this?'

'Balance, you ignorant fool!' Rin Varalath's shriek echoed in the chamber.

'Where is she now?' Silchas Ruin asked.

'Alas,' replied Draxos Hulch, 'we do not know. But she is close, for reasons that are entirely her own. She will, I fear, oppose you, should you decide to force your way past us.'

'I seek the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye. I do not understand that you would object to such a goal.'

'We see the truth of that,' said Ordant Brid.

A long moment of silence. The five Onyx Wizards faced a nonplussed Silchas Ruin, who seemed at a loss for words.

'It is,' said Penith Vinandas, 'a question of . . . compassion.'

'We are not fools,' said Ordant Brid. 'We cannot oppose you. Perhaps, however, we can guide you. The journey to the place you seek is arduous – the path is not straight. Silchas Ruin, it is with some astonishment that I tell you that we have reached something of a consensus on this. You have no idea how rare such a thing is – granted, I speak of a compromise, one which sits uneasier with some of us than with others. Nonetheless, we have agreed to offer you a guide.'

'A guide? To lead me on this crooked path, or tug me ever astray from it?'

'Such deceit would not work for very long.'

'True; nor would I be merciful upon its discovery.'

'Of course.'

Silchas Ruin crossed his arms. 'You will provide us with a guide. Very well. Which of you has volunteered?'

'Why, none of us,' said Ordant Brid. 'The need for us here prevents such a thing. As you said, a spear of ice is directed at us, and while we cannot shatter it, perhaps we can . . . redirect it. Silchas Ruin, your guide shall be the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord.' At that, the wizard gestured.

Clip rose to his feet, then began his descent to the Disc of Concordance. The chain and its rings appeared in his hand, whirring, then snapping, then whirring out again.

'He is Anomander's Mortal Sword?' Silchas Ruin asked in obvious disbelief as he stared up at this meeting's audience of one.

Clip smiled. 'Do you think he would be displeased?'

After a moment, the brother of Rake grimaced, then shook his head. 'Probably not.'

'Come the morrow,' Ordant Brid said, 'we will begin preparing the way for the continuation of your journey.'

Reaching the edge of the lowest tier, Clip dropped lightly onto the polished stone of the Disc, then approached Silchas Ruin, the chain in his hand spinning and clacking.

'Must you always do that?' Silchas Ruin demanded.

'Do what?'

Silchas Ruin walked into the chamber, followed a moment later by the Tiste Andii, Clip.

Seren Pedac felt a sudden chill, although she could not determine its source. Clip was smiling, but it was a cynical smile, and it seemed his eyes held steady on Fear Sengar, as if awaiting some kind of challenge.

'Acquitor,' said Silchas Ruin, releasing the clasp of his cloak as he walked over to the stone table against a far wall, where waited wine and food, 'at least one mystery has been answered.'

'Oh?'

'The preponderance of wraiths here in the Andara, the countless ghosts of dead Tiste Andii – I know why they are here.'

'I am sorry, I did not know this place was crowded with wraiths. I've not even seen Wither lately.'

He glanced across at her, then poured himself a goblet of wine. 'It is extraordinary,' he murmured, 'how something as basic as the absence of a taste on the tongue can prove the most excruciating torture . . . when one is buried for thousands of years.'

She watched him take a mouthful of the watery wine, watched him savour it. Then he said, 'Time, Acquitor. The Omtose Phellack ritual, which froze all in place, defied Hood himself – apologies, Hood is the Lord of Death. The ghosts – they had nowhere to go. Easily captured and enslaved by the Tiste Edur, but many others managed to evade that fate, and they are here, among their mortal kin. The Onyx Wizards speak of compassion and balance, you see . . .'

*No, I do not, but I think that is of no matter*. 'Will the wizards help us?'

A wry grimace from Silchas Ruin, then he shrugged. 'Our fell party now has a new member, Acquitor, who is charged with guiding us to what we seek.'

Fear Sengar, suddenly tense, stepped close to Clip. 'Tiste Andii,' he said, 'know this, please. I possess no enmity towards you or your people. If indeed you will lead us to where the soul of Scabandari is bound, I will be in your debt – indeed, all of the Edur will be in your debt.'

Clip grinned. 'Oh, you don't want that, warrior.'

Fear seemed taken aback.

'You,' said Silchas Ruin to the Tiste Edur, 'pose the gravest threat to these Andii. Your kind has good reason to hunt down every last one of them; nor are the Letherii well disposed to them, given their resistance to the annexation – a resistance that continues to this day. Bluerose does not appreciate being occupied; nor do the humans who lived in peace alongside those possessing Andii blood in their veins hold any loyalty to the Letherii conquerors. When the Onyx Order ruled, it was a distant sort of rule, reluctant to interfere in daily activities and making few demands on the populace. And now, Fear Sengar, your kind rule the Letherii, compounding the resentment seething in Bluerose.'

'I cannot speak for the empire,' Fear said. 'Only for myself. Yet I believe that, should events transpire in the manner I desire, then true liberation may be the reward granted by the Edur for their assistance – to the entire province of Bluerose and all its inhabitants. Certainly, I would argue for that.'

Clip's laugh was sardonic.

The chain spun to wrap tight around his right hand, yet that served as his only comment to these grave pronouncements and bold promises.

Seren Pedac felt sick inside. Clip, this maddening pup with his chain and rings, his ever-mocking expression . . .

*Oh, Fear Sengar, do not trust this one. Do not trust him at all.*

'Are you certain you want to do this, Overseer?'

Brohl Handar glanced across at the Atri-Preda. 'This expedition is to be punitive, Bivatt. No formal proclamation of war has been made – the missive from Letheras is very clear on this. Apparently, it falls under my duties as Overseer to ensure that the engagement does not exceed its parameters. You march to hunt down and destroy those who slaughtered the settlers.'

Her eyes remained on the columns of Letherii and Edur troops marching along the road. Dust hung in the air, staining the sky's bright blue. The sound from the army reminded Brohl Handar of broken ice groaning and crunching its way down a river. Bivatt spoke. 'That is precisely my intention, Overseer. That and nothing more, as I have been commanded.'

He studied her for a moment longer, then shifted on the saddle to ease the strain on his lower back – he preferred admiring horses from afar to perching atop the damned things. It seemed they understood his distaste and reciprocated in kind, and this one was in the habit of tossing its head as it drew up from every canter, clearly seeking to crack Brohl's chin. The Atri-Preda told him he leaned too far forward, and the horse knew it and saw the error as an opportunity to inflict damage. The Tiste Edur was not looking forward to this journey. 'Nonetheless,' he finally said, 'I will accompany you.'

He knew she was unhappy with the prospect. Yet he had his own bodyguards, from his own tribe. His own carriage and driver and team of oxen. More than enough supplies to ensure they were not a burden on the military train.

'I remain concerned for your safety,' she said.

'No need. I have every confidence in my Arapay—'

'Forgive me, Overseer, but hunting seals is not the same as—'

'Atri-Preda,' Brohl Handar interrupted in turn, 'my warriors faced crack Letherii soldiers in the conquest, and it was your Letherii who broke. Seals? Indeed, some of them weighing as much as an ox, with tusks longer than a

shortsword. And white-furred bears, and cave-dwelling bears. Short-legged wolves and pack wolves. And, one should not forget, Jheck shape-shifters. Did you imagine the white wastes of the north are empty lands? Against what an Arapay must face every day, the Letherii were no great threat. As for protecting me from the Awl, presumably such a need would only arise following the rout of your forces. We shall have a K'risnan of the Den-Ratha, as well as your mage cadre. In short,' he concluded, 'your concerns ring false. Tell me, Atri-Preda, what was the substance of your secret meeting with Factor Letur Anict?'

The question, voiced as an afterthought, seemed to strike her like a blow, and the eyes she fixed on him were wide, alarmed, until something darker swirled to life. 'Financial discussions, Overseer,' she said in a cold tone. 'An army needs to eat.'

'The financing of this punitive expedition is provided by the Imperial Treasury.'

'Said funds managed by the Factor. After all, that is the function of being a factor, sir.'

'Not in this instance,' Brohl Handar replied. 'Disbursement is being managed by my office. In fact, it is Edur coin that is sponsoring this expedition. Atri-Preda, you should in the future be certain of the facts before you contrive to lie. Now, it would seem that you are to proceed under the burden of two sets of orders. I do hope for the sake of your peace of mind that the two do not prove conflicting.'

'I should imagine not,' she said tightly.

'Are you confident of that, Atri-Preda?'

'I am, sir.'

'Good.'

'Overseer, a number of the settlers killed originated from within the Factor's own household.'

Brohl's brows lifted. 'The desire for a most bloody vengeance must be overwhelming, then, for poor Letur Anict.'

'At that meeting, sir, I simply reiterated my intent to exact the necessary punishment against the murderers. The Factor sought reassurance, which I was pleased to give him under the circumstances.'

'In other words, Letur Anict was somewhat alarmed that his control over the management of the expedition had been taken away, for such a decision was unprecedented. One must assume he is intelligent enough to recognize – once he has calmed down somewhat – that the move indicates disapproval of his recent excesses.'

'I would not know, sir.'

'I shall be interested to gauge his humility upon our triumphant return, Atri-Preda.'

She said nothing.

Of course, he added to himself, there would probably be much more to Letur Anict's response at that time, given that there was, in fact, nothing truly official in any of this. The Factor's cronies in the palace – the Letherii servants of, it was likely, the Chancellor – would be outraged upon discovering this circumvention; but this time it was the Edur who had organized this minor usurpation, a working of the tribes, the linkage established via the K'risnan and the Edur staffs of various overseers. There was vast risk in all this – the Emperor himself knew nothing of it, after all.

Letur Anict needed to be reined in. No, more than that, the man needed hobbling. Permanently. If Brohl had his way, there would be a new Factor of Drene within a year, and as for Letur Anict's holdings, well, the crime for high treason and corruption at the scale he had managed would without doubt result in their confiscation, with all familial rights stripped away, and restitution at such high level that the Anict line would be Indebted for generations to come.

*He is corrupt. And he has spun a deadly web here, from Drene out into every bordering nation. He seeks war with all of our neighbours.*

*Unnecessary war. Pointless beyond the covetous greed of one man.* Such corruption needed excision, for there were plenty of Letur Anicts in this empire, thriving under the protection of the Liberty Consign and, quite possibly, the Patriotists. This man here would be the example and the warning.

*You Letherii think us fools. You laugh behind our backs. Mock us in our ignorance of your sophisticated deceptions. Well, there is more than one kind of sophistication, as you shall discover.*

Finally, Brohl Handar no longer felt helpless.

Atri-Preda Bivatt fumed in silence. The damned fool at her side was going to get himself killed, and she would be made responsible for that failure to protect him. K'risnan and Arapay bodyguards would achieve nothing. The Factor's agents infected every Letherii legion on this march, and among those agents . . . *Errant-damned assassins. Masters of the Poison.*

She liked this warrior at her side, dour as he was – which seemed a trait of the Tiste Edur in any case. And though clearly intelligent, he was also . . . naive.

It was clear that Letur Anict had penetrated the pathetic unofficial efforts of Brohl Handar and a half-dozen other overseers, and the Factor intended to eliminate this nascent threat here and now. On this very expedition.

'*We have a problem with Brohl Handar*,' the Factor had said, his pale round face looking like dusty stone in the habitual gloom of his inner sanctum.

'Sir?'

'Unsanctioned, he seeks to exceed his responsibilities, and in so doing undermine the traditional functions of a factor in a border province. His ambitions have drawn others into his web, which could, alas, have fatal repercussions.'

'Fatal? How?'

'Atri-Preda, I must tell you. No longer are the Patriotists focusing exclusively on the Letherii in the empire. There has come to light evidence of an emerging conspiracy among the Tiste Edur – against the state, possibly against the Emperor himself.'

*Absurd. Do you truly take me for such a fool, Anict? Against the state and against the Emperor are two different things. The state is you and people like you. The state is the Liberty Consign and the Patriotists. The state is the Chancellor and his cronies.* Against them, the notion of a conspiracy among the Tiste Edur to rid the empire of Letherii corruption seemed more than plausible. They had been occupiers long enough to come to understand the empire they had won; to begin to realize that a far more subtle conquest had taken place, of which they were the losers.

The Tiste Edur were, above all else, a proud people. Not likely to abide defeat, and the fact that the victors were, by their measure, cowards in the true sense of the term would sting all the more. So she was not surprised that Brohl Handar and his fellow Edur had at last begun a campaign of eradication against the Letherii running the state. *Not surprising, either, the extent to which the Edur have underestimated their enemy.*

'Sir, I am an officer in the Imperial Army. My commander is the Emperor himself.'

'The Emperor rules us all, Atri-Preda,' Letur Anict had said with a faint smile. 'The conspiracy among his kind directly threatens his loyal support structure – those who endeavour, at great personal sacrifice, to maintain that apparatus.'

'People such as yourself.'

'Indeed.'

'What are you asking of me, sir?'

'Brohl Handar will insist on accompanying your punitive expedition. I believe it is his intent to claim territories reconquered for himself ' – a wave of one hand – 'no doubt in the name of the empire or some such meaningless nonsense.'

*You mean, as you have done?*

'I will try to talk him out of it,' she said. 'It's not safe—'

'Indeed it isn't. Precisely my point.' After a moment, Letur Anict leaned back. 'You will, alas, not win your argument.

The Overseer will march with you, accepting the risks.'

*The risks, yes. Imagining they come from the Awl.*

'I will do all I can to preserve his life,' Bivatt said.

A spread of hands. 'Of course. That is your duty, and we both know how treacherous the Awl can be, especially as they are now commanded by none other than Redmask. Who can say what dread ambushes he has contrived to spring upon you, with the principal aim of murdering commanders and other important personages. Indeed, Atri-Preda, you have your duty and I would expect no less from you. But I do remind you, Brohl Handar is engaged in treason.'

'Then have Orbyn Truthfinder arrest him.' *If he dares, for that will bring it all out into the open, and you're not ready for that.*

'We will,' the Factor then said, 'be prepared for his return.'

*So soon?* 'Has the Emperor been informed of these developments, sir?'

'He has. The Patriotists would not be engaged in this hunt were it not so – I am sure you understand that, Atri-Preda.'

She believed she did. Even Karos Invictad would not proceed without some sort of sanction. 'Is that all, sir?'

'It is. Errant smile on your hunt, Atri-Preda.'

'Thank you, sir.'

And now, everything had proceeded to match the Factor's predictions. Brohl Handar would accompany the expedition, refuting her every argument against the idea. Reading his expression, she saw a renewed confidence and will – the Overseer felt as if he had found, at last, firm

footing. No error in his recognition of his true enemy. The unmitigated disaster lay in the Edur's belief that he had made the first move.

She said now to the Overseer, 'Sir, if you will excuse me. I must have words with my officers.'

'Of course,' Brohl Handar replied. 'When do you anticipate contacting the enemy?'

*Oh, you fool, you already have.* 'That depends, sir, on whether they're fleeing, or coming straight for us.'

The Overseer's brows lifted. 'Do you fear this Redmask?'

'Fear that yields respect is not a bad thing, sir. In that fashion, yes, I fear Redmask. As he will me, before too long.'

She rode away then, down to her troops, seeking out, not an officer, but one man in particular, a horseman among the Bluerose, taller and duskier than most.

After a time she found him, gestured him to ride out to her side, and they walked their horses along one edge of the road. She spoke of two things, one loud enough to be heard by others and concerning the health of the mounts and other such mundane details; the other in much quieter tones, which no-one but the man could hear.

'What can you see of the horizon's bruised smear, that cannot be blotted out by a raised hand?'

Redmask glanced over at the foreigner.

Anaster Toc smiled. 'Lying in a ditch amidst the wastes of humanity is something I would recommend to any nascent poet. The rhythms of ebb and flow, the legacy of what we discard. Wealth like liquid gold.'

Not entirely sane any more, Redmask judged, unsurprised. Skin and bones, scabbed and stained with fiery, peeling rashes. At least he could now stand without the aid of a stick, and his appetite had returned. Before long, Redmask believed, the foreigner would recover, at least physically. The poor man's mind was another matter.

'Your people,' Anaster Toc continued after a moment, 'do not believe in poetry, in the power of simple words. Oh, you sing with the coming of dawn and the fleeing sun. You sing to storm clouds and wolf tracks and shed antlers you find in the grass. You sing to decide the order of beads on a thread. But no words to any of them. Just tonal variations, as senseless as birdsong—'

'Birds sing,' cut in Natarkas who stood on the foreigner's other side, squinting westward to the dying sun, 'to tell others they exist. They sing to warn of hunters. They sing to woo mates. They sing in the days before they die.'

'Very well, the wrong example. You sing like whales—'

'Like what?' asked Natarkas and two other copper-faces behind them.

'Oh, never mind, then. My point was, you sing without words—'

'Music is its own language.'

'Natarkas,' said Anaster Toc, 'answer me this, if you will. The song the children use when they slip beads onto a thread, what does it mean?'

'There is more than one, depending on the pattern desired. The song sets the order of the type of bead, and its colour.'

'Why do such things have to be set?'

'Because the beads tell a story.'

'What story?'

'Different stories, depending on the pattern, which is assured by the song. The story is not lost, not corrupted, because the song never changes.'

'For Hood's sake,' the foreigner muttered. 'What's wrong with words?'

'With words,' said Redmask, turning away, 'meanings change.'

'Well,' Anaster Toc said, following as Redmask made his way back to his army's camp, 'that is precisely the point. That's their value – their ability to adapt—'

'Grow corrupt, you mean. The Letherii are masters at corrupting words, their meanings. They call war peace, they call tyranny liberty. On which side of the shadow you stand decides a word's meaning. Words are the weapons used by those who see others with contempt. A contempt which only deepens when they see how those others are deceived and made into fools because they chose to believe. Because in their naivety they thought the meaning of a word was fixed, immune to abuse.'

'Togg's teats, Redmask, that's a long speech coming from you.'

'I hold words in contempt, Anaster Toc. What do you mean when you say "Togg's teats"?'

'Togg's a god.'

'Not a goddess?'

'No.'

'Then its teats are—'

'Useless. Precisely.'

'What of the others? "Hood's Breath"?'

'Hood is the Lord of Death.'

'Thus . . . no breath.'

'Correct.'

'Beru's mercy?'

'She has no mercy.'

'Mowri fend?'

'The Lady of the Poor fends off nothing.'

Redmask regarded the foreigner. 'Your people have a strange relationship with your gods.'

'I suppose we do. Some decry it as cynical and they may have a point. It's all to do with power, Redmask, and what it does to those who possess it.

Gods not excepted.'

'If they are so unhelpful, why do you worship them?'

'Imagine how much more unhelpful they'd be if we didn't.' At whatever Anaster Toc saw in Redmask's eyes, he then laughed.

Annoyed, Redmask said, 'You fought as an army devoted to the Lord and Lady of the Wolves.'

'And see where it got us.'

'The reason your force was slaughtered is because my people betrayed you. Such betrayal did not come from your wolf gods.'

'True, I suppose. We accepted the contract. We assumed we shared the meaning of the words we had exchanged with our employers—' At that he offered Redmask a wry smile. 'We marched to war believing in honour. So. Togg and Fanderay are not responsible – especially for the stupidity of their followers.'

'Are you now godless, Anaster Toc?'

'Oh, I heard their sorrowful howls every now and then, or at least I imagined I did.'

'Wolves came to the place of slaughter and took the hearts of the fallen.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'They broke open the chests of your comrades and ate their hearts, leaving everything else.'

'Well, I didn't know that.'

'Why did you not die with them?' Redmask asked. 'Did you flee?'

'I was the best rider among the Grey Swords. Accordingly, I was acting to maintain contact between our forces. I was, unfortunately, with the Awl when the decision was made to flee. They dragged me down from my horse and beat me senseless. I don't know why they didn't kill me there and then. Or just leave me for the Letherii.'

'There are levels to betrayal, Anaster Toc; limits to what even the Awl can stomach. They could run from the battle, but they could not draw a blade across your throat.'

'Well, that's a comforting relief. Apologies. I have always been prone to facetious commentary. I suppose I should be thankful, but I'm not.'

'Of course you're not,' Redmask said. They were approaching the broad hide awning protecting the rodaraskin maps the war leader had drawn – mostly from what he could recall of Letherii military maps he had seen. These new maps had been stretched out on the ground, pegged down, arrayed like pieces of a puzzle to create a single rendition of a vast area – one that included the south border kingdoms. 'But you are a soldier, Anaster Toc, and I have need of soldiers.'

'So, you seek an agreement between us.'

'I do.'

'A binding of words.'

'Yes.'

'And what if I choose to leave? To walk away?'

'You will be permitted and given a horse and supplies. You may ride east or southeast or indeed north, although there is nothing to be found to the north. But not west, not southwest.'

'Not to the Lether Empire, in other words.'

'Correct. I do not know what vengeance you hold close to your wounded soul. I do not know if you would betray the Awl – to answer their betrayal of you. For which I would not blame you in the least. I have no desire to have to kill you and this is why I forbid you to ride to Lether.'

'I see.'

Redmask studied the map in the crepuscular light. The black lines seemed to be fading into oblivion before him. 'It is my thought, however, to appeal to your desire for vengeance against the Letherii.'

'Rather than the Awl.'

'Yes.'

'You believe you can defeat them.'

'I shall, Anaster Toc.'

'By preparing fields of battle well in advance. Well, as a tactic I would not gainsay it. Assuming the Letherii are foolish enough to position themselves precisely where you want them.'

'They are arrogant,' Redmask said. 'Besides, they have no choice. They wish to avenge the slaughter of settlements and the theft of herds they call their property – even though they stole them from us. They wish to punish us, and so will be eager to cross blades.'

'Using cavalry, infantry, archers and mages.'

'Yes.'

'How do you intend to negate those mages, Redmask?'

'I will not tell you, yet.'

'In case I leave, circle round and somehow elude you and your hunters.'

'The chance of that is remote.'

At the foreigner's smile, Redmask continued, 'I understand you are a skilled rider, but I would not send Awl after you. I would send my K'Chain Che'Malle.'

Anaster Toc had turned and he seemed to be studying the encampment, the rows upon rows of tents, the wreathed dung smoke of the fires. 'You have fielded what, ten, twelve thousand warriors?'

'Closer to fifteen.'

'Yet you have broken up the clans.'

'I have.'

'In the manner needed to field something resembling a professional army. You must shift their loyalty from the old blood-ties. I've seen you badgering your troop commanders, ensuring that they will follow your commands in battle. I've seen them in turn badgering their squad leaders, and the squad leaders their squads.'

'You are a soldier, Anaster Toc.'

'And I hated every moment of it, Redmask.'

'That matters not. Tell me of your Grey Swords, the tactics they employed.'

'That won't be much help. I could, however, tell you of the army I originally belonged to, before the Grey Swords.' He glanced over with his one glittering eye, and Redmask saw amusement there, a kind of mad hilarity that left him uneasy. 'I could tell you of the Malazans.'

'I have not heard of that tribe.'

Anaster Toc laughed again. 'Not a tribe. An empire. An empire three, four times the size of Lether.'

'You will stay, then?'

Anaster Toc shrugged. 'For now.'

There was nothing simple to this man, Redmask realized.

Mad indeed, but it could prove a useful madness. 'Then how,' he asked, 'do the Malazans win their wars?'

The foreigner's twisted smile gleamed in the dusk, like the flash of a knife. 'This could take a while, Redmask.'

'I will send for food.'

'And oil lamps – I can't make out a damned thing on your map.'

'Do you approve of my intent, Anaster Toc?'

'To create a professional army? Yes, it's essential, but it will change everything. Your people, your culture, everything.' He paused, then added

in a dry, mocking tone, 'You'll need a new song.'

'Then you must create it,' Redmask replied. 'Choose one from among the Malazans. Something appropriate.'

'Aye,' the man muttered, 'a dirge.'

The white knife flashed again, and Redmask would rather it had remained sheathed.

# CHAPTER NINE

Everywhere I looked I saw the signs of war upon the landscape. There the trees had crested the rise, despatching skirmishers down the slope to challenge the upstart low growth in the riverbed, which had been dry as bone until the breaking of the ice dams high in the mountains, where the savage sun had struck in unexpected ambush, a siege that breached the ancient barricades and unleashed torrents of water upon the lowlands.

And here, on this tuck and fold of bedrock, the old scars of glaciers were vanishing beneath advancing mosses, creeping and devouring colonies of lichen which were themselves locked in feuds with kin.

Ants flung bridges across cracks in the stone, the air above swirling with winged termites, dying in silence in the serrated jaws of rhinazan that swung and ducked as they evaded yet fiercer predators of the sky.

All these wars proclaim the truth of life, of existence itself. Now we must ask ourselves, are we to excuse all we do by citing such ancient and ubiquitous laws? Or can we proclaim our freedom of will by defying our natural urge to violence, domination and slaughter? Such were my thoughts – puerile and cynical – as I stood triumphant over the last man I had slain, his lifeblood a dwindling stream down the length of my sword-blade, whilst in my soul there surged such pleasure as to leave me trembling . . .

King Kilanbas in the Valley of Slate
Third Letheras Tide – the Wars of Conquest

The ruins of a low wall encircled the glade, the battered rough-cut basalt dividing swaths of green grasses. Just beyond rose a thin copse of young

birch and aspen, spring leaves bright and fluttering. Behind this stand the forest thickened, darkened, grey-skinned boles of pine crowding out all else. Whatever the wall had enclosed had vanished beneath the soft loam of the glade, although depressions were visible here and there to mark out cellar pits and the like.

The sunlit air seemed to spin and swirl, so thick were the clouds of flying insects, and there was a taint of something in the warm, sultry air that left Sukul Ankhadu with a vague sense of unease, as if ghosts watched from the black knots on the trees surrounding them. She had quested outward more than once, finding nothing but minute life-sparks – the natural denizens of any forest – and the low murmurings of earth spirits, too weak to do much more than stir restlessly in their eternal, dying sleep. Nothing to concern them, then, which was well.

Standing close to one of the shin-high walls, she glanced back at the makeshift shelter, repressing yet another surge of irritation and impatience.

Freeing her sister should have yielded nothing but gratitude from the bitch. Sheltatha Lore had not exactly fared well in that barrow – beaten senseless by Silchas Ruin and a damned Locqui Wyval, left near-drowned in a bottomless bog in some memory pocket realm of the Azath, where every moment stretched like centuries – so much so that Sheltatha had emerged indelibly stained by those dark waters, her hair a burnt red, her skin the hue of a betel nut, as waxy and seamed as that of a T'lan Imass. Wounds gaped bloodless. Taloned fingernails gleamed like elongated beetle carapaces – Sukul had found her eyes drawn to them again and again, as if waiting for them to split, revealing wings of exfoliated skin as they dragged the fingers loose to whirl skyward.

And her sister was fevered. Day after day, raving with madness. Dialogue – negotiation – had been hopeless thus far. It had been all Sukul had managed, just getting her from that infernal city out here to a place of relative quietude.

She now eyed the lean-to which, from this angle, hid the recumbent form of Sheltatha Lore, grimly amused by the sight. Hardly palatial, as far as residences were concerned, and especially given their royal blood – if the

fiery draconean torrent in their veins could justify the appellation, and why wouldn't it? Worthy ascendants were few and far between in this realm, after all. Barring a handful of dour Elder Gods – and these nameless spirits of stone and tree, spring and stream. *No doubt Menandore has fashioned for herself a more stately abode – ripe for appropriation. Some mountain fastness, spired and impregnable, so high as to be for ever wreathed in clouds. I want to walk those airy halls and call them my own. Our own. Unless I have no choice but to lock Sheltatha in some crypt, where she can rave and shriek disturbing no-one—*

'I should tear your throat out.'

The croak, coming from beneath the boughed shelter, triggered a sigh from Sukul. She approached until she came round to the front and could look within. Her sister had sat up, although her head was bowed, that long, crimson hair obscuring her face. Her long nails at the end of her dangling hands glistened as if leaking oil. 'Your fever has broken – that is well.'

Sheltatha Lore did not look up. 'Is it? I called for you – when Ruin was clawing loose – when he turned upon me – that self-serving, heartless bastard! Turned on me! *I called on you!* '

'I heard, sister. Alas, too far away to do much about it – that fight of yours. But I came at last, didn't I? Came, and freed you.'

Silence for a long moment; then, her voice dark and brutal, 'Where is she, then?'

'Menandore?'

'It was her, wasn't it?' Lore looked up suddenly, revealing amber eyes, the whites stained like rust. A ghastly gaze, yet wide and searching. 'Striking me from behind – I suspected nothing – I thought you were there, I thought – you *were* there, weren't you!'

'As much a victim as you, Sheltatha. Menandore had prepared long for that betrayal, a score of rituals – to drive you down, to leave me helpless to intervene.'

'She struck first, you mean.' The statement was a half-snarl. 'Were we not planning the same, Sukul?'

'That detail is without much relevance now, isn't it?'

'And yet, dear sister, she didn't bury *you*, did she?'

'Not through any prowess on my part. Nor did I bargain for my freedom. No, it seemed Menandore was not interested in destroying me.' Sukul could feel her own sneer of hatred twisting her features. 'She never thought I was worth much. Sukul Ankhadu, Dapple, *the Fickle*. Well, she is about to learn otherwise, isn't she?'

'We must find an Azath,' Sheltatha Lore said, baring brown teeth. 'She must be made to suffer what I suffered.'

'I agree, sister. Alas, there are no surviving Azath in this place – on this continent, I mean. Sheltatha Lore – will you trust me? I have something in mind – a means of trapping Menandore, of exacting our long-awaited revenge. Will you join me? As true allies – together, there are none here powerful enough to stop us—'

'You fool, there is Silchas Ruin.'

'I have an answer for him as well, sister. But I need your help. We must work together, and in so doing we will achieve the demise of both Menandore and Silchas Ruin. Do you trust me?'

Sheltatha Lore's laugh was harsh. 'Cast that word away, sister. It is meaningless. I demand vengeance. You have something to prove – to us all. Very well, we shall work together, and see what comes of it. Tell me your grand plan, then. Tell me how we shall crush Silchas Ruin who is without equal in this realm—'

'You must conquer your fear of him,' Sukul said, glancing away, studying the glade, noting how the shafts of sunlight had lengthened, and the ruined wall surrounding them now hunched like crumbling darkness. 'He is not indomitable. Scabandari proved that well enough—'

'Are you truly so stupid as to believe that?' Sheltatha demanded, clambering free of the lean-to, straightening like some anthropomorphic tree. Her skin gleamed, polished and the colour of stained wood. 'I shared the bastard's barrow for a thousand eternities. I tasted his dreams, I sipped at the stream of his secretmost thoughts – he grew careless . . .'

Sukul scowled at her kin. 'What are you saying?'

The terrible eyes fixed mockingly on her. 'He stood on the field of battle. He stood, his back to Scabandari – whom he called Bloodeye and was that not hint enough? Stood, I tell you, and but waited for the knives.'

'I do not believe you – that must be a lie, it must be!'

'Why? Wounded, weaponless. Sensing the fast approach of this realm's powers – powers that would not hesitate in destroying him and Bloodeye both. Destroying in the absolute sense – Silchas was in no condition to defend against them. Nor, he well knew, was Scabandari, for all that idiot's pompous preening over the countless dead. So, join in Scabandari's fate, or . . . *escape*?'

'Millennia within a barrow of an Azath – you call that an escape, Sheltatha?'

'More than any of us – more even than Anomandaris,' she said, her eyes suddenly veiled, 'Silchas Ruin thinks . . . *draconean*. As cold, as calculating, as *timeless*. Abyss below, Sukul Ankhadu, you have no idea . . .' A shudder took Sheltatha then and she turned away. 'Be sure of your schemes, sister,' she added in a guttural tone, 'and, no matter how sure you make yourself, leave us a means of escape. For when we fail.'

Another faint groan, from the earth spirits on all sides, and Sukul Ankhadu shivered, assailed by uncertainty – and fear. 'You must tell me more of him,' she said. 'All you learned—'

'Oh, I shall. Freedom has left you . . . arrogant, sister. We must strip that from you, we must free your gaze of that veil of confidence. And refashion your plans accordingly.' A long pause, then Sheltatha Lore faced Sukul once again, an odd glint in her eyes. 'Tell me, did you choose in deliberation?'

'What?'

A gesture. 'This place . . . for my recovery.'

Sukul shrugged. 'Shunned by the local people. Private – I thought—'

'Shunned, aye. With reason.'

'And that would be?'

Sheltatha studied her for a long moment, then she simply turned away. 'Matters not. I am ready to leave here now.'

*As am I, I think.* 'Agreed. North—'

Another sharp glance, then a nod.

*Oh, I see your contempt, sister. I know you felt as Menandore did – I know you think little of me. And you thought I would step forward once she struck? Why? I spoke of trust, yes, but you did not understand. I do indeed trust you, Sheltatha. I trust you to lust for vengeance. And that is all I need. For ten thousand lifetimes of slight and disregard . . . it will be all I need.*

His tattooed arms bared in the humid heat, Taxilian walked to the low table where sat Samar Dev, ignoring the curious regard from other patrons in the courtyard restaurant. Without a word he sat, reached for the jug of watered, chilled wine and poured himself a goblet, then leaned closer. 'By the Seven Holies, witch, this damned city is a wonder – and a nightmare.'

Samar Dev shrugged. 'The word is out – a score of champions now await the Emperor's pleasure. You are bound to attract attention.'

He shook his head. 'You misunderstand. I was once an architect, yes? It is one thing' – he waved carelessly – 'to stand agape at the extraordinary causeways and spans, the bridges and that dubious conceit that is the Eternal Domicile – even the canals with their locks, inflows and outflows, the aqueduct courses and the huge blockhouses with their massive pumps and the like.' He paused for another mouthful of wine. 'No, I speak of something else entirely. Did you know, an ancient temple of sorts collapsed the day we arrived – a temple devoted, it seems, to *rats*—' 'Rats?'

'Rats, not that I could glean any hint of a cult centred on such foul creatures.'

'Karsa would find the notion amusing,' Samar Dev said with a half-smile, 'and acquire in such cultists yet another enemy, given his predilection for wringing the necks of rodents—'

Taxilian said in a low voice, 'Not just rodents, I gather . . .'

'Alas, but on that matter I would allow the Toblakai some steerage room – he warned them that no-one was to touch his sword. A dozen or more times, in fact. That guard should have known better.'

'Dear witch,' Taxilian sighed, 'you've been careless or, worse, lazy. It's to do with the Emperor, you see. The weapon destined to cross blades with Rhulad's own. The touch signifies a blessing – did you not know? The loyal citizens of this empire *want* the champions to succeed. They want their damned tyrant obliterated. They pray for it; they dream of it—'

'All right,' Samar Dev hissed, 'keep your voice down!'

Taxilian spread his hands, then he grimaced. 'Yes, of course. After all, every shadow hides a Patriotist—'

'Careful of whom you mock. That's a capricious, bloodthirsty bunch, Taxilian, and you being a foreigner only adds to your vulnerability.'

'You need to eavesdrop on more conversations, witch. The Emperor is unkillable. Karsa Orlong will join all the others in that cemetery of urns. Do not expect otherwise. And when that happens, why, all his . . . hangers-on, his companions – all who came with him will suffer the same fate. Such is the decree. Why would the Patriotists bother with us, given our inevitable demise?' He drained the last wine from his goblet, then refilled it. 'In any case, you distracted me. I was speaking of that collapsed temple, and what I saw of its underpinnings – the very proof for my growing suspicions.'

'I didn't know we're destined for execution. Well, that changes things – although I am not sure how.' She fell silent; then, considering Taxilian's other words, she said, 'Go on.'

Taxilian slowly leaned back, cradling the goblet in his hands. 'Consider Ehrlitan, a city built on the bones of countless others. In that, little different from the majority of settlements across all Seven Cities. But this Letheras, it is nothing like that, Samar Dev. No. Here, the older city never collapsed, never disintegrated into rubble. It still stands, following street patterns not quite obscured. Here and there, the ancient buildings remain, like crooked teeth. I have never seen the like, witch – it seems no regard whatsoever was accorded those old streets. At least two canals cut right through them – you can see the bulge of stonework on the canal walls, like the sawed ends of long-bones.'

'Peculiar indeed. Alas, a subject only an architect or a mason would find a source of excitement, Taxilian.'

'You still don't understand. That ancient pattern, that mostly hidden gridwork and the remaining structures adhering to it – witch, none of it is accidental.'

'What do you mean?'

'I should probably not tell you this, but among masons and architects there are secrets of a mystical nature. Certain truths regarding numbers and geometry reveal hidden energies, lattices of power. Samar Dev, there are such courses of energy, like twisted wires in mortar, woven through this city. The collapse of Scale House revealed it to my eyes: a gaping wound, dripping ancient blood – nearly dead blood, I'll grant you, but undeniable.'

'Are you certain of this?'

'I am, and furthermore, someone *knows*. Enough to ensure that the essential constructs, the buildings that form a network of fulcra – the fixing-points to the lattice of energy – they all remain standing—'

'Barring this Scale House.'

A nod. 'Not necessarily a bad thing – indeed, not necessarily *accidental*, that collapse.'

'Now you have lost me. That temple fell down on purpose?'

'I would not discount that. In fact, that accords precisely with my suspicions. We approach a momentous event, Samar Dev. For now, that is as far as I can take it. Something is going to happen. I only pray we are alive to witness it.'

'You've done little to enliven my day,' she said, eyeing her half-finished breakfast of bread, cheeses and unfamiliar fruit. 'At the very least you can order us another carafe of wine for your sins.'

'I think you should run,' Taxilian said under his breath, not meeting her eyes. 'I would, barring the event I believe is coming. But as you say, my interest is perhaps mostly professional. You, on the other hand, would do better to look to your own life – to maintaining it, that is.'

She frowned. 'It's not that I hold to an unreasoning faith in the martial prowess of Karsa Orlong. There have been enough hints that the Emperor has fought other great champions, other warriors of formidable skill, and none could defeat him. Nonetheless, I admit to a feeling of . . . well, loyalty.'

'Enough to join him at Hood's Gate?'

'I am not sure. In any case, don't you imagine that we're being watched? Don't you think that others have tried to flee their fate?'

'No doubt. But Samar Dev, to not even try . . .'

'I will think on it, Taxilian. Now, I've changed my mind – that second carafe of wine will have to wait. Let us walk this fair city. I am of a mind to see this ruined temple for myself. We can gawk like the foreigners we are, and the Patriotists will think nothing of it.' She rose from her seat.

Taxilian followed suit. 'I trust you've already paid the proprietor.'

'No need. Imperial largesse.'

'Generosity towards the condemned – that runs contrary to my sense of this fell empire.'

'Things are always more complex than they first seem.'

Tracked by the eyes of a dozen patrons, the two left the restaurant.

The sun devoured the last shadows in the sand-floored compound, heat rising in streaming waves along the length of the rectangular, high-walled enclosure. The sands had been raked and smoothed by servants, and that surface would remain unmarred until late afternoon, when the challengers in waiting would troop out to spar with each other and gather – those who shared a language – to chew and gnaw on these odd, macabre circumstances. Yet, leaning against a wall just within the inner entranceway, Taralack Veed watched Icarium move slowly alongside the compound's outer wall, one hand out to brush with fingertips the bleached, dusty stone and its faded frieze.

On that frieze, faded images of imperial heroes and glory-soaked kings, chipped and scarred now by the weapons of unmindful foreigners sparring with each other, each and every one of those foreigners intent upon the murder of the Emperor now commanding the throne.

Thus, a lone set of footprints now, tracking along that wall, a shadow diminished to almost nothing beneath the tall, olive-skinned warrior, who paused to look skyward as a flock of unfamiliar birds skittered across the blue gap, then continued on until he reached the far end, where a huge barred gate blocked the way into the street beyond. The figures of guards were just visible beyond the thick, rust-pitted bars. Icarium halted facing that gate, stood motionless, the sunlight bleaching him as if the Jhag had just stepped out from the frieze on his left, as faded and worn as any hero of antiquity.

*But no, not a hero. Not in anyone's eyes. Not ever. A weapon and nothing more. Yet . . . he lives, he breathes, and when something breathes, it is more than a weapon. Hot blood in the veins, the grace of motion, a cavort of thoughts and feelings in that skull, awareness like flames in the eyes*. The Nameless Ones had knelt on the threshold of stone for too long. Worshipping a house, its heaved grounds, its echoing rooms – why not the living, breathing ones who might dwell within that house? Why not the immortal builders? A temple was hallowed ground not to its own existence but to the god it would honour. But the Nameless Ones did not see it that

way. *Worship taken to its absurd extreme . . . yet perhaps in truth as primitive as leaving an offering in a fold of rock, of blood-paint on that worn surface . . . oh, I am not the one for this, for thoughts that chill the marrow of my soul.*

*A Gral, cut and scarred by the betrayals. The ones that wait in every man's shadow – for we are both house and dweller. Stone and earth. Blood and flesh. And so we will haunt the old rooms, walk the familiar corridors, until, turning a corner, we find ourselves facing a stranger, who can be none other than our most evil reflection.*

*And then the knives are drawn and a life's battle is waged, year after year, deed after deed. Courage and vile treachery, cowardice and bright malice.*

*The stranger has driven me back, step by step. Until I no longer know myself – what sane man would dare recognize his own infamy? Who would draw pleasure from the sensation of evil, satisfaction from its all too bitter rewards? No, instead we run with our own lies – do I not utter my vows of vengeance each dawn? Do I not whisper my curses against all those who wronged me?*

*And now I dare judge the Nameless Ones, who would wield one evil against another. And what of my place in this dread scheme?*

He stared across at Icarium, who still faced the gate, who stood like a statue, blurred behind ripples of heat. *My stranger. Yet which one of us is the evil one?*

His predecessor, Mappo – the Trell – had long ago left such struggles behind, Taralack suspected. Choosing to betray the Nameless Ones rather than this warrior before the gate. An evil choice? The Gral was no longer so sure of his answer.

Hissing under his breath, he pushed himself from the wall and walked the length of the compound, through waves of heat, to stand at the Jhag's side. 'If you leave your weapons,' Taralack said, 'you are free to wander the city.'

'Free to change my mind?' Icarium asked with a faint smile.

'That would achieve little – except perhaps our immediate execution.'

'There might be mercy in that.'

'You do not believe your own words, Icarium. Instead, you speak to mock me.'

'That may be true, Taralack Veed. As for this city,' he shook his head, 'I am not yet ready.'

'The Emperor could decide at any moment—'

'He will not. There is time.'

The Gral scowled up at the Jhag. 'How are you certain?'

'Because, Taralack Veed,' Icarium said, quiet and measured as he turned to walk back, 'he is afraid.'

Staring after him, the Gral was silent. *Of you? What does he know? Seven Holies, who would know of this land's history? Its legends? Are they forewarned of Icarium and all that waits within him?*

Icarium vanished in the shadow beneath the building entranceway. After a dozen rapid heartbeats, Taralack followed, not to reclaim the Jhag's dour companionship, but to find one who might give him the answers to the host of questions now assailing him.

Varat Taun, once second in command to Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, huddled in a corner of the unfurnished room. His only reaction to Yan Tovis's arrival was a flinch. Curling yet tighter in that corner, he did not lift his head to look upon her. This man had, alone, led Taralack Veed and Icarium back through the warrens – a tunnel torn open by unknown magic, through every realm the expedition had traversed on their outward journey. The Atri-Preda herself had seen the blistering wound that had been the exit gate; she had heard its shrieking howl, a voice that seemed to reach into her chest and grip her heart; she had stared in disbelieving wonder at the three figures emerging from it, one dragged between two . . .

No other survivors. Not one. Neither Edur nor Letherii.

Varat Taun's mind had already snapped. Incapable of coherent explanations, he had babbled, shrieking at anyone who drew too close to his

person, yet unable or unwilling to tear his wide eyes from the unconscious form of Icarium.

Taralack Veed's rasping words, then: *All dead. Everyone. The First Throne is destroyed, every defender slaughtered – Icarium alone was left standing, and even he was grievously wounded. He is . . . he is worthy of your Emperor.*

But so the Gral had been saying since the beginning. The truth was, no-one knew for certain. What had happened in the subterranean sepulchre where stood the First Throne?

The terrible claims did not end there. The Throne of Shadow had also been destroyed. Yan Tovis remembered the dismay and horror upon the features of the Tiste Edur when they comprehended Taralack Veed's badly accented words.

Another expedition was necessary. That much had been obvious. To see the truth of such claims.

The gate had closed shortly after spitting out the survivors, the healing almost as violent and fraught as the first wounding, with a cacophony of screams – like the lost souls of the damned – erupting from that portal at the last moment, leaving witnesses with the terrible conviction that others had been racing to get out.

Swift into the wake of that suspicion came the news of failures – on ship after ship of the fleet – by the warlocks of the Edur when they sought to carve new paths into the warrens. The trauma created by that chaotic rent had somehow sealed every possible path to the place of the Throne of Shadow, and that of the T'lan Imass First Throne. Was this permanent? No-one knew. Even to reach out, as the warlocks had done, was to then recoil in savage pain. *Hot*, they said; *the very flesh of existence rages like fire*.

Yet in truth Yan Tovis had little interest in such matters. She had lost soldiers, and none stung more than her second in command, Varat Taun.

She stared now upon his huddled form. *Is this what I will deliver to his wife and child in Bluerose?* Letherii healers had tended to him,

unsuccessfully – the wounds on his mind were beyond their powers to mend.

The sounds of boots in the corridor behind her. She stepped to one side as the guard arrived with his barefooted charge. Another 'guest'. A monk from the archipelago theocracy of Cabal who had, oddly enough, volunteered to join the Edur fleet, following, it turned out, a tradition of delivering hostages to fend off potential enemies. The Edur fleet had been too damaged to pose much threat at that time, still licking its wounds after clashing with the denizens of Perish, but that had not seemed to matter much – the tradition announcing first contact with strangers was an official policy.

The Cabalhii monk standing now in the threshold of the doorway was no higher than Twilight's shoulder, slight of build, bald, his round face painted into a comical mask with thick, solid pigments, bright and garish, exaggerating an expression of hilarity perfectly reflected in the glitter of the man's eyes. Yan Tovis had not known what to expect, but certainly nothing like . . . this.

'Thank you for agreeing to see him,' she now said. 'I understand that you possess talent as a healer.'

The monk seemed moments from bursting into laughter at her every word, and Twilight felt a flash of irritation.

'Can you understand me?' she demanded.

Beneath the face paint the features were flat, unresponsive, as he said in fluid Letherii, 'I understand your every word. By the lilt of your accent, you come from the empire's north, on the coast. You have also learned the necessary intonation that is part of the military's own lexicon, which does not entirely amend the residue of your low birth, yet is of sufficient mediation to leave most of your comrades uncertain of your familial station.' The eyes, a soft brown, were brimming with silent mirth with each statement. 'This of course does not refer to the temporary taint that has come from long proximity among sailors, as well as the Tiste Edur. Which, you may be relieved to hear, is fast diminishing.'

Yan Tovis glanced at the guard standing behind the monk. A gesture sent her away.

'If that was your idea of a joke,' she said to the Cabalhii after the woman had left, 'then even the paint does not help.'

The eyes flashed. 'I assure you, no humour was intended. Now, I am told your own healers have had no success. Is this correct?'

'Yes.'

'And the Tiste Edur?'

'They are . . . uninterested in Varat Taun's fate.'

A nod, then the monk, drawing his loose silks closer, walked noiselessly towards the figure in the far corner.

Varat Taun squealed and began clawing at the walls.

The monk halted, cocking his head, then turned about and approached Yan Tovis. 'Do you wish to hear my assessment?'

'Go on.'

'He is mad.'

She stared down into those dancing eyes, and felt a sudden desire to throttle this Cabalhii. 'Is that all?' Her question came out in a rasping tone, rough with threat.

'All? It is considerable. Madness. Myriad causes, some the result of physical damage to the brain, others due to dysfunctioning organs which can be ascribed to traits of parentage – an inherited flaw, as it were. Other sources include an imbalance of the Ten Thousand Secretions of the flesh, a tainting of select fluids, the fever kiss of delusion. Such imbalances can be the result of aforementioned damage or dysfunction.'

'Can you heal him?'

The monk blinked. 'Is it necessary?'

'Well, that is why I sent for you – excuse me, but what is your name?'

'My name was discarded upon attaining my present rank within the Unified Sects of Cabal.'

'I see, and what rank is that?'

'Senior Assessor.'

'Assessing what?'

The expression did not change. 'All matters requiring assessment. Is more explanation required?'

Yan Tovis scowled. 'I'm not sure,' she muttered. 'I think we are wasting our time.'

Another wild cavort in the monk's eyes. 'The appearance of a foreign fleet among our islands required assessment. The empire that despatched it required assessment. The demands of this Emperor require assessment. And now, as we see, the condition of this young soldier requires assessment. So I have assessed it.'

'So where, precisely, does your talent for healing come in?'

'Healing must needs precede assessing success or failure of the treatment.'

'What treatment?'

'These things follow a progression of requirements, each of which must be fully met before one is able to proceed to the next. Thus. I have assessed this soldier's present condition. He is mad. I then, for your benefit, described the various conditions of madness and their possible causes. Thereafter we negotiated the issue of personal nomenclature – an aside with little relevance, as it turns out – and now I am ready to resume the task at hand.'

'Forgive my interruption, then.'

'There is no need. Now, to continue. This soldier has suffered a trauma sufficient to disrupt the normal balance of the Ten Thousand Secretions. Various organs within his brain are now trapped in a cycle of dysfunction beyond any measures of self-repair. The trauma has left a residue in the

form of an infection of chaos – it is, I might add, never wise to sip the deadly waters between the warrens. Furthermore, this chaos is tainted with the presence of a false god.'

'A false god – what is false about it?'

'I am a monk of the Unified Sects of Cabal, and it now seems necessary that I explain the nature of my religion. Among the people of Cabal there are three thousand and twelve sects. These sects are devoted, one and all, to the One God. In the past, terrible civil wars plagued the islands of Cabal, as each sect fought for domination of both secular and spiritual matters. Not until the Grand Synod of New Year One was peace secured and formalized for every generation to come. Hence, the Unified Sects. The solution to the endless conflicts was, it turned out, brilliantly simple. "Belief in the One God occludes all other concerns." '

'How could there be so many sects and only one god?'

'Ah. Well, you must understand. The One God writes nothing down. The One God has gifted its children with language and thought in the expectation that the One God's desires be recorded by mortal hands and interpreted by mortal minds. That there were three thousand and twelve sects at New Year One is only surprising in that there were once tens of thousands, resulting from a previous misguided policy of extensive education provided to every citizen of Cabal – a policy since amended in the interests of unification. There is now one college per sect, wherein doctrine is formalized. Accordingly, Cabal has known twenty-three months of uninterrupted peace.'

Yan Tovis studied the small man, the dancing eyes, the absurd mask of paint. 'And which sect doctrine did you learn, Senior Assessor?'

'Why, that of the Mockers.'

'And their tenet?'

'Only this: the One God, having written nothing down, having left all matters of interpretation of faith and worship to the unguided minds of over-educated mortals, is unequivocally insane.'

'Which, I suppose, is why your mask shows wild laughter—'

'Not at all. We of the Mockers are forbidden laughter, for that is an invitation to the hysteria afflicting the One God. In the Holy Expression adorning my face you are granted a true image of the One Behind the Grand Design, in so far as our sect determines such.' The monk suddenly clasped his hands beneath his chin. 'Now, our poor soldier has suffered overlong as it is, whilst we digressed yet again. I have assessed the taint of a false god in the beleaguered mind of this wounded man. Accordingly, that false god must be driven out. Once this is done, I shall remove the blockages in the brain preventing self-repair, and so all imbalances will be redressed. The effects of said treatment will be virtually immediate and readily obvious.'

Yan Tovis blinked. 'You can truly heal him?'

'Have I not said so?'

'Senior Assessor.'

'Yes?'

'Are you aware of the purpose you are meant to serve here in Letheras?'

'I believe I will be expected to meet the Emperor on a pitch, whereupon we shall endeavour to kill each other. Furthermore, I am led to understand that this Emperor cannot be slain with any measure of finality, cursed as he is by a false god – the very same false god who has afflicted this soldier here, by the way. Thus, it is my assessment that I will be killed in that contest, to the dismay of no-one and everyone.'

'And your One God will not help you, a senior priest of its temple?'

The man's eyes glittered. 'The One God helps no-one. After all, should it help one then it must help all, and such potentially universal assistance would inevitably lead to irreconcilable conflict, which in turn would without question drive the One God mad. As indeed it did, long ago.'

'And that imbalance can never be redressed?'

'You lead me to reassess you, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis. You are rather clever, in an intuitive way. I judge that your Ten Thousand Secretions flow even

and clear, probably the result of remorseless objectivity or some similar blasphemy of the spirit – for which, I assure you, I hold no particular resentment. So, we share this question, which enunciates the very core of the Mockers' Doctrine. It is our belief that, should every mortal in this realm achieve clarity of thought and a cogent regard of morality, and so acquire a profound humility and respect for all others and for the world in which they live, then the imbalance will be redressed, and sanity will return once more to the One God.'

'Ah . . . I see.'

'I am sure you do. Now, I believe a healing was imminent. A conjoining of the warrens of High Mockra and High Denul. Physiological amendment achieved by the latter. Expurgation of the taint and elimination of the blockages, via the former. Of course, said warrens are faint in their manifestation here in this city, for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, I do indeed possess substantial talents, some of which are directly applicable to the matter at hand.'

Feeling slightly numbed, Yan Tovis rubbed at her face. She closed her eyes – then, at a ragged sigh from Varat Taun, opened them again, to see her second in command's limbs slowly unfold, the fierce clutch of muscles on his neck visibly ease as the man, blinking, slowly lifted his head.

And saw her.

'Varat Taun.'

A faint smile, worn with sorrow – but a natural sorrow. 'Atri-Preda. We made it back, then . . .'

She frowned, then nodded. 'You did. And since that time, Lieutenant, the fleet has come home.' She gestured at the room. 'You are in the Domicile's Annexe, in Letheras.'

'Letheras? What?' He struggled to rise, pausing a moment to look wonderingly at the Cabalhii monk; then, using the wall behind him, he straightened and met Twilight's eyes. 'But that is impossible. We'd two entire oceans to cross, at the very least—'

'Your escape proved a terrible ordeal, Lieutenant,' Yan Tovis said. 'You have lain in a coma for many, many months. I expect you are feeling weak —'

A grimace. 'Exhausted, sir.'

'What do you last recall, Lieutenant?'

Dread filled his wan features and his gaze fell away from hers. 'Slaughter, sir.'

'Yes. The barbarian known as Taralack Veed survived, as did the Jhag, Icarium—'

Varat Taun's head snapped up. 'Icarium! Yes – Atri-Preda, he – he is an *abomination*!'

'A moment!' cried the Senior Assessor, eyes now piercing as he stared at the lieutenant. 'Icarium, the Jhag Warrior? *Icarium, Lifestealer?* '

Suddenly frightened, Yan Tovis said, 'Yes, Cabalhii. He is here. Like you, he will challenge the Emperor—' She stopped then, in shock, as the monk, eyes bulging, flung both hands to his face, streaking across the thick paint, and, teeth appearing to clench down hard on his lower lip, bit. Until blood spurted. The monk reeled back until he struck the wall beside the doorway – then, all at once, he whirled about and fled the room.

'Errant take us,' Varat Taun hissed, 'what was all that about?'

*Forbidden laughter?* She shook her head. 'I don't know, Lieutenant.'

'Who . . . what . . .?'

'A healer,' she replied in a shaky voice, forcing herself to draw a steadying breath. 'The one who awakened you, Varat. A guest of the Emperor's – from Uruth's fleet.'

Varat Taun licked chapped, broken lips. 'Sir.'

'Yes?'

'Icarium . . . Errant save us, he must not be awakened. Taralack knows, he was there, he saw. The Jhag . . . have him sent away, sir—'

She approached him, boots hard on the floor. 'The Gral's claims are not exaggerated, then? He will bring destruction?'

A whisper: '*Yes*.'

She could not help herself then, and reached out, gloved hands grasping the front of Varat's ragged shirt, dragging him close. 'Tell me, damn you! Can he kill him? *Can Icarium kill him?* '

Horror swirled in the soldier's eyes as he nodded.

*Errant's blessing, maybe this time* . . . 'Varat Taun. Listen to me. I am leading my company out in two days. Back to the north. You will ride with me, as far up the coast as necessary – then you ride east – to Bluerose. I am assigning you to the Factor's staff there, understood? Two days.'

'Yes sir.'

She released him, suddenly embarrassed at her own outburst.

Yet her legs were weak as reeds beneath her still. She wiped sweat from her eyes. 'Welcome back, Lieutenant,' she said in a rough voice, not meeting his gaze. 'Are you strong enough to accompany me?'

'Sir. Yes, I shall try.'

'Good.'

Emerging from the room, they came face to face with the Gral barbarian. Breath hissed from Varat Taun.

Taralack Veed had halted in the corridor and was staring at the lieutenant. 'You are . . . recovered. I did not think—' He shook his head, then said, 'I am pleased, soldier—'

'You warned us again and again,' Varat Taun said.

The Gral grimaced and seemed ready to spit, then decided otherwise. Gravely, he said, 'I did. And yes, I was foolish enough to be an eager

witness . . .'

'And next time?' The question from Varat Taun was a snarl.

'You do not need to ask me that.'

The lieutenant stared hard at the savage, then he seemed to sag, and Yan Tovis was astonished to see Taralack Veed move forward to take Varat's weight. *Ah, it is what they have shared. It is that. That.* The Gral glared over at her. 'He is half dead with exhaustion!'

'Yes.'

'I will help him now – where would you lead us, Atri-Preda?'

'To more hospitable quarters. What are you doing here, Veed?'

'A sudden fear,' he said as he now struggled with Varat's unconscious form.

She moved to help him. 'What sort of fear?'

'That he would be stopped.'

'Who?'

'Icarium. That you would stop him – now, especially, now that this man is sane once more. He will tell you – tell you everything—'

'Taralack Veed,' she said in a harsh tone, 'the lieutenant and I leave this city in two days. We ride north. Between then and now, Varat Taun is under my care. No-one else's.'

'None but me, that is.'

'If you insist.'

The lieutenant between them, the Gral studied her. 'You know, don't you. He told you—'

'Yes.'

'And you mean to say nothing, to no-one. No warning—'

'That is correct.'

'Who else might suspect – your ancient histories of the First Empire. Your scholars—'

'I don't know about that. There is one, and if I am able he will be coming with us.' *That damned monk. It should be simple enough. The Cabal priests misunderstood. Sent us an ambassador, not a champion. No value in killing him – the poor fool cannot fight – imagine Rhulad's rage at wasting his time . . . yes, that should do it.*

'No scholars . . .'

She grimaced and said, 'Dead, or in prison.' She glared across at the Gral. 'What of you? Will you flee with us?'

'You know I cannot – I am to share Icarium's fate. More than any of them realize. No, Atri-Preda, I will not leave this city.'

'Was this your task, Taralack Veed? To deliver Icarium here?'

He would not meet her eyes.

'Who sent you?' she demanded.

'Does it matter? We are here. Listen to me, Twilight, your Emperor is being sorely used. There is war among the gods, and we are as nothing – not you, not me, not Rhulad Sengar. So ride, yes, as far away as you can. And take this brave warrior with you. Do this, and I will die empty of sorrow—'

'And what of regrets?'

He spat on the floor. His only answer, but she understood him well enough.

Sealed by a massive, thick wall of cut limestone at the end of a long-abandoned corridor in a forgotten passage of the Old Palace, the ancient Temple of the Errant no longer existed in the collective memory of the citizens of Letheras. Its beehive-domed central chamber would have remained unlit, its air still and motionless, for over four centuries, and the

spoked branches leading off to lesser rooms would have last echoed to footfalls almost a hundred years earlier.

The Errant had walked out into the world, after all. The altar stood cold and dead and probably destroyed. The last priests and priestesses – titles held in secret against the plague of pogroms – had taken their gnostic traditions to their graves, with no followers left to replace them.

*The Master of the Holds has walked out into the world. He is now among us. There can be no worship now – no priests, no temples. The only blood the Errant will taste from now on is his own. He has betrayed us.*

*Betrayed us all.*

And yet the whispers never went away. They echoed like ghost-winds in the god's mind. With each utterance of his name, as prayer, as curse, he could feel that tremble of power – mocking all that he had once held in his hands, mocking the raging fires of blood sacrifice, of fervent, fearful faith. There were times, he admitted, that he knew regret. For all that he had so willingly surrendered.

Master of the Tiles, the Walker Among the Holds. *But the Holds have waned, their power forgotten, buried by the passing of age upon age. And I too have faded, trapped in this fragment of land, this pathetic empire in a corner of a continent. I walked into the world . . . but the world has grown old.*

He stood now facing the stone wall at the end of the corridor. Another half-dozen heartbeats of indecision, then he stepped through.

And found himself in darkness, the air stale and dry in his throat. Once, long ago, he had needed tiles to manage such a thing as walking through a solid stone wall. Once, his powers had seemed new, brimming with possibilities; once, it had seemed he could shape and reshape the world. Such arrogance. It had defied every assault of reality – for a time.

He still persisted in his conceit, he well knew – a curse among all gods. And he would amuse himself, a nudge here, a tug there, to then stand back and see how the skein of fates reconfigured itself, each strand humming

with his intrusion. But it was getting harder. The world resisted him. *Because I am the last, I am myself the last thread reaching back to the Holds.* And if that thread was severed, the tension suddenly snapping, flinging him loose, stumbling forward into the day's light . . . what then?

The Errant gestured, and flames rose once more from the clamshell niches low on the dome's ring-wall, casting wavering shadows across the mosaic floor. A sledgehammer had been taken to the altar on its raised dais. The shattered stones seemed to bleed recrimination still in the Errant's eyes. *Who served whom, damn you? I went out, among you, to make a difference – so that I could deliver wisdom, whatever wisdom I possessed. I thought – I thought you would be grateful.*

*But you preferred shedding blood in my name. My words just got in your way, my cries for mercy for your fellow citizens – oh, how that enraged you.*

His thoughts fell silent. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. *What is this? I am not alone.*

A soft laugh from one of the passageways. He slowly turned.

The man crouched there was more ogre than human, broad shoulders covered in bristly black hair, a bullet head thrust forward on a short neck. The bottom half of the face was strangely pronounced beneath long, curling moustache and beard, and large yellowed tusks jutted from the lower jaw, pushing clear of lip and thick, ringleted hair. Stubby, battered hands hung down from long arms, the knuckles on the floor.

From the apparition came a bestial, rank stench.

The Errant squinted, seeking to pierce the gloom beneath the heavy brows, where small narrow-set eyes glittered dull as rough garnets. 'This is my temple,' he said. 'I do not recall an open invitation to . . . guests.'

Another low laugh, but there was no humour in it, the Errant realized. Bitterness, as thick and pungent as the smell stinging the god's nostrils.

'I remember you,' came the creature's voice, low and rumbling. 'And I knew this place. I knew what it had been.

It was . . . safe. Who recalls the Holds, after all? Who knew enough to suspect? Oh, they can hunt me down all they want – yes, they will find me in the end – I know this. Soon, maybe. Sooner, now that you have found me, Master of the Tiles. He might have returned me, you know, along with other . . . gifts. But he has failed.' Another laugh, this time harsh. 'A common demise among mortals.'

Though he spoke, no words emerged from the ogre's mouth. That heavy, awkward voice was in the Errant's head, which was all for the best – those tusks would have brutalized every utterance into near incomprehensibility. 'You are a god.'

More laughter. 'I am.'

'You walked into the world.'

'Not by choice, Master of the Tiles. Not like you.'

'Ah.'

'And so my followers died – oh, how they have died. Across half the world, their blood soaked the earth. And I could do nothing. I *can* do nothing.'

'It is something,' the Errant observed, 'to hold yourself to such a modest form. But how much longer will that control last? How soon before you burst the confines of this temple of mine? How long before you heave yourself into the view of all, shouldering aside the clouds, shaking mountains to dust—'

'I will be long from here before then, Master of the Tiles.'

The Errant's smile was wry. 'That is a relief, god.'

'You have survived,' the god now said. 'For so long. How?'

'Alas,' said the Errant, 'my advice to you would be useless. My power quickly dissipated. It had already been terribly wounded – the Forkrul Assail's pogroms against my faithful saw to that. The thought of another failure like that one was too much . . . so I willingly relinquished most of what remained to me. It made me ineffectual, beyond, perhaps, this city and

a modest stretch of river. And so not a threat to anyone.' *Not even you, tusked one.* 'You, however, cannot make a similar choice. They will want the raw power within you – in your blood – and they will need it spilled before they can drink, before they can bathe in what's left of you.'

'Yes. One last battle awaits me. That much, at least, I do not regret.'

*Lucky you.* 'A battle. And . . . a war?'

Amusement in his thoughts, then, 'Oh, indeed, Master of the Tiles. A war – enough to make my heart surge with life, with hunger. How could it not? I am the Boar of Summer, Lord of the Hosts on the Field of Battle. The chorus of the dying to come . . . ah, Master, be glad it will be nowhere close —'

'I am not so sure of that.'

A shrug.

The Errant frowned, then asked, 'How long do you intend to remain here, then?'

'Why, as long as I can, before my control crumbles – or I am summoned to my battle, my death, I mean. Unless, of course, you choose to banish me.'

'I would not risk the power revealed by that,' the Errant said.

A rumbling laugh. 'You think I would not go quietly?'

'I know it, Boar of Summer.'

'True enough.' Hesitation, then the war god said, 'Offer me sanctuary, Errant, and I will yield to you a gift.'

'Very well.'

'No bargaining?'

'No. I've not the energy. What is this gift, then?'

'This: the Hold of the Beasts is awakened. I was driven out, you see, and there was need, necessity, *insistence* that some inheritor arise to take my

place – to assume the voices of war. Treach was too young, too weak. And so the Wolves awoke. They flank the throne now – no, they *are* the throne.'

The Errant could barely draw breath at this revelation. A Hold, *awakened*? From a mouth gone dry as dust, he said, 'Sanctuary is yours, Boar of Summer. And, for your trail here, my fullest efforts at . . . misdirection. None shall know, none shall even suspect.'

'Please, then, block those who call on me still. Their cries fill my skull – it is too much—'

'Yes, I know. I will do what I can. Your name – do they call upon the Boar of Summer?'

'Not often,' the god replied. 'Fener. They call upon Fener.'

The Errant nodded, then bowed low.

He passed through the stone wall and once more found himself in the disused corridor of the Old Palace. *Awakened? Abyss below . . . no wonder the Cedance whirls in chaos. Wolves? Could it be . . .*

*This is chaos! It makes no sense!* Feather Witch stared down at the chipped tiles scattered on the stone floor before her. *Axe, bound to both Saviour and Betrayer of the Empty Hold. Knuckles and the White Crow circle the Ice Throne like leaves in a whirlpool. Elder of Beast Hold stands at the Portal of the Azath Hold. Gate of the Dragon and Blood-Drinker converge on the Watcher of the Empty Hold – but no, this is all madness.*

The Dragon Hold was virtually dead. Everyone knew this, every Caster of the Tiles, every Dreamer of the Ages. Yet here it vied for dominance with the Empty Hold – and what of Ice? Timeless, unchanging, that throne had been dead for millennia. *White Crow – yes, I have heard. Some bandit in the reaches of the Bluerose Mountains now claims that title. Hunted by Hannan Mosag – that tells me there is power to that bandit's bold claim. I must speak again to the Warlock King, the bent, broken bastard.*

She leaned back on her haunches, wiped chilled sweat from her brow. Udinaas had claimed to see a white crow, centuries ago it seemed now, there on the strand beside the village. A white crow in the dusk. And she

had called upon the Wyval, her lust for power overwhelming all caution. Udinaas – he had stolen so much from her. She dreamed of the day he was finally captured, alive, helpless in chains.

*The fool thought he loved me – I could have used that. I should have. My own set of chains to snap shut on his ankles and wrists, to drag him down. Together, we could have destroyed Rhulad long before he came to his power.* She stared down at the tiles, at the ones that had fallen face up – none of the others were in play, as the fates had decreed. *Yet the Errant is nowhere to be seen – how can that be?* She reached down to one of the face-down tiles and picked it up, looked at its hidden side. *Shapefinder. See, even here, the Errant does not show his hand.* She squinted at the tile. *Fiery Dawn, these hints are new . . . Menandore. And I was thinking about Udinaas – yes, I see now. You waited for me to pick you up from this field. You are the secret link to all of this.*

She recalled the scene, the terrible vision of her dream, that horrendous witch taking Udinaas and . . . *Maybe the chains on him now belong to her. I did not think of that. True, he was raped, but men sometimes find pleasure in being such a victim. What if she is protecting him now? An immortal . . . rival. The Wyval chose him, didn't it? That must mean something – it's why she took him, after all. It must be.*

In a sudden gesture she swept up the tiles, replacing them in their wooden box, then wrapping the box in strips of hide before pushing the package beneath her cot. She then drew from a niche in one wall a leather-bound volume, easing back its stained, mouldy cover. Her trembling fingers worked through a dozen brittle vellum pages before she reached the place where she had previously left off memorizing the names listed within – names that filled the entire volume.

*Compendium of the Gods.*

The brush of cool air. Feather Witch looked up, glared about. Nothing. No-one at the entrance, no unwelcome shadows in the corners – lanterns burned on all sides. There had been a taint to that unseemly breath, something like wax . . .

She shut the book and slid it back onto its shelf, then, heartbeat rapid in her chest, she hurried over to a single pavestone in the room's centre, wherein she had earlier inscribed, with an iron stylus, an intricate pattern. *Capture*. 'The Holds are before me,' she whispered, closing her eyes. 'I see Tracker of the Beasts, footfalls padding on the trail of the one who hides, who thinks to flee. But no escape is possible. The quarry circles and circles, yet is drawn ever closer to the trap. It pulls, it drags – the creature screams, but no succour is possible – none but my mercy – *and that is never free!* ' She opened her eyes, and saw a smudge of mist bound within the confines of the inscribed pattern. 'I have you! Ghost, spy – show yourself!'

Soft laughter.

The mist spun, wavered, then settled once more, tendrils reaching out tentatively – beyond the carved borders.

Feather Witch gasped. 'You mock me with your power – yet, coward that you are, you dare not show yourself.'

'Dear girl, this game will eat you alive.' The words, the faintest whisper – the touch of breath along both ears. She started, glared about, sensed a presence behind her and spun round – no-one.

'Who is here?' she demanded.

'Beware the gathering of names . . . it is . . . premature . . .'

'Name yourself, ghost! I command it.'

'Oh, compulsion is ever the weapon of the undeserving. Let us instead bargain in faith. That severed finger you keep round your neck, Caster, what do you intend with it?'

She clutched at the object. 'I will not tell you—'

'Then I in turn will reveal to you the same – nothing.'

She hesitated. 'Can you not guess?'

'Ah, and have I guessed correctly?'

'Yes.'

'Premature.'

'I am biding my time, ghost – I am no fool.'

'No indeed,' the ghost replied. 'Even so, let us extend the bargain—'

'Why? You have revealed nothing of yourself—'

'Patience. Caster of the Tiles, await my . . . encouragement. Before you do what you intend. Await me, and I will assist you.'

She snorted. 'You are a ghost. You have no power—'

'I am a ghost, and that is precisely why I have power. For what you seek, that is.'

'Why should I believe you? Why should I agree to anything you suggest?'

'Very well, my part of the bargain. You speak now with Kuru Qan, once Ceda to King Ezgara Diskanar.'

'Slain by Trull Sengar . . .'

Something like a chuckle. 'Well, *someone* needed to thrust the spear . . .'

'You knew it was coming?'

'Knowing and being able to do something about it are two different matters, Caster of the Tiles. In any case, lay the true blame at the Errant's feet. And I admit, I am of a mind to call him out on that, eventually. But like you, I understand the necessity of biding one's time. Have we a bargain?'

She licked her lips, then nodded. 'We have.'

'Then I shall leave you to your education. Be careful when casting your tiles – you risk much by so revealing your talents as a seer.'

'But I must know—'

'Knowing and being able to do something about it—'

'Yes,' she snapped, 'I heard you the first time.'

'You lack respect, girl.'

'And be glad of it.'

'You may have a point there. Worth some consideration, I think.'

'Do you now intend to spy on me my every moment down here?'

'No, that would be cruel, not to mention dull. When I come here, you shall be warned – the wind, the mist, yes? Now, witness its vanishing.'

She stared down at the swirling cloud, watched as it faded, then was gone.

Silence in the chamber, the air still beyond her own breath. *Kuru Qan, the Ceda! See how I gather allies. Oh, this shall be sweet vengeance indeed!*

The waning sun's shafts of dusty light cut across the space where the old temple had stood, although the wreckage filling the lower half of that gap was swallowed in gloom. Fragments of façade were scattered on the street – pieces of rats in dismaying profusion. Edging closer, Samar Dev kicked at the rubble, frowning down at the disarticulated stone rodents. 'This is most . . . alarming,' she said.

'Ah,' Taxilian said, smiling, 'now the witch speaks. Tell me, what do you sense in this fell place?'

'Too many spirits to count,' she murmured. 'And all of them . . . rats.'

'There was a D'ivers once, wasn't there? A terrible demonic thing that travelled the merchant roads across Seven Cities—'

'Gryllen.'

'Yes, that was its name! So, do we have here another such . . . Gryllen?'

She shook her head. 'No, this feels older, by far.'

'And what of that bleeding? Of power?'

'I'm not sure.' Glancing around, she saw a tall, cloaked man leaning against a wall on the other side of the street, watching them. 'Some things, long ago grinding to a halt, should never be reawakened. Alas . . .'

Taxilian sighed. 'You use that word a lot. "Alas". You are too resigned, Samar Dev. You flee from your own curiosity – I do not think you were always like this.'

She squinted at him. 'Oh, my curiosity remains. It's my belief in my own efficacy that has taken a beating.'

'We spin and swirl on the currents of fate, do we?'

'If you like.' She sighed. 'Very well, I've seen enough. Besides, it will be curfew soon, and I gather guards kill lawbreakers on sight.'

'You have seen – but you explain nothing!'

'Sorry, Taxilian. All of this requires . . . some thought. If I reach any spectacular conclusions any time soon, I will be sure to let you know.'

'Do I deserve such irony?'

'No, you don't. Alas.'

Bugg finally made his way round the corner, emerging from the alley's gloom then pausing in the sunlit street. He glanced over at Tehol, who stood leaning against a wall, arms crossed beneath his blanket, which he had wrapped about him like a robe. 'Master,' he said, 'why do you hesitate now?'

'Me? Why, this only appears to be hesitation. You know, you could have let me help you carry that.'

Bugg set the heavy sack down. 'You never offered.'

'Well, that would be unseemly. You should have insisted.'

'Are you sure you have that right, Master?'

'Not in the least, but some graciousness on your part would have helped us move past this awkward moment.'

From the bag came soft clucking sounds.

Tehol blinked down at it. 'Bugg, you said retired hens, correct?'

'I did. In exchange for some modest repairs to a water trough.'

'But . . . they're not dead.'

'No, Master.'

'But . . . that means one of us has to kill them. Wring their necks. See the light of life dim in their beady eyes.

You are a hard man, Bugg.'

'Me?'

'Retired – their egg-laying days over. Isn't there some kind of pasture awaiting them? Some well-strewn pecking ground?'

'Only the one in the sky, Master. But I see your point. About killing them, I mean.'

'Blood on your hands, Bugg – I'm glad I'm not you.'

'This is ridiculous. We'll figure something out when we get back home.'

'We could build us a coop on the roof, as mad folk do for pigeons. That way the birds could fly in and out, back and forth, and see something of this fine city.'

'Chickens can't fly, Master.'

'Beats wringing their necks, though, don't you think?'

'Seeing the city?'

'Well, momentarily.'

Clearly satisfied with his solution, Tehol adjusted his blanket then walked out onto the street. Sighing, Bugg collected the sack with its dozen hens and followed at a somewhat slower pace.

'Well,' he said as he joined Tehol in front of the ruin, 'at least that foreign witch is gone.'

'She was a foreign witch? Rather pretty, in a stolid, earthy way. All right, handsome, then, although I assure you I would never say that to her face, knowing how women are so easily offended.'

'By a compliment?'

'Absolutely. If it is the *wrong* compliment. You have been . . . inactive far too long, dear Bugg.'

'Possibly. I am also reticent when it comes to compliments. They have a way of coming after you.'

Tehol glanced over at him, brows lifted. 'Sounds like you've been married once or twice.'

'Once or twice,' Bugg replied, grimacing. Glancing up at the ruined Scale House, he went very still. 'Ah, I see now what she no doubt saw.'

'If what you are seeing is the source for making the hairs of my neck stand on end every time I come here, then I would be pleased if you explained.'

'For someone to step inside,' Bugg said, 'of necessity there must be a door. And if one does not exist, one must be made.'

'How can a collapsed building be a door, Bugg?'

'I begin to comprehend what is coming.'

'Sufficient to suggest a course of action?'

'In this matter, Master, the best course is to do nothing.'

'Hold on, Bugg, that particular conclusion seems to crop up rather often with you.'

'We'd best get home before curfew, Master. Care to take a turn with this sack?'

'Errant's blessing, have you lost your mind?'

'I thought as much.'

There was little in Sirryn Kanar's thoughts that reached down to the depths of his soul – he had a sense of that, sufficient to make him recognize that he was blessed with a virtually untroubled life. He possessed a wife frightened enough to do whatever he told her to do. His three children held him in the proper mixture of respect and terror, and he had seen in his eldest son the

development of similar traits of dominance and certainty. His position as a lieutenant in the Palace Cell of the Patriotists did not, as far as he was concerned, conflict with his official title of Sergeant of the Guard – protection of the powerful demanded both overt and covert diligence, after all.

The emotions commanding him were similarly simple and straightforward. He feared what he could not understand, and he despised what he feared. But acknowledging fear did not make him a coward – for he had proclaimed for himself an eternal war against all that threatened him, be it a devious wife who had raised walls round her soul, or conspirators against the empire of Lether. His enemies, he well understood, were the true cowards. They thought within clouds that obscured all the harsh truths of the world. Their struggles to 'understand' led, inevitably, to seditious positions against authority. Even as they forgave the empire's enemies, they condemned the weaknesses of their own homeland – not recognizing that they themselves personified such weaknesses.

An empire such as Lether was ever under siege. This had been the first statement uttered by Karos Invictad during the recruitment and training process, and Sirryn Kanar had understood the truth of that with barely a moment's thought. A siege, inside and out, yes – the very privileges the empire granted were exploited by those who would see the empire destroyed. And there could be no room for 'understanding' such people – they were evil, and evil must be expurgated.

The vision of Karos Invictad had struck him with the force of revelation, yielding such perfect clarity and, indeed, peace in what had been, at times, a soul in turmoil – battered and assailed on occasion by a world blurry with confusion and uncertainty – that all that raged within him settled out as certainty arrived, blazing and blinding in its wondrous gift of release.

He now lived an untroubled life, and so set an example to his fellow agents in the palace. In their eyes he had seen, again and again, the glimmer of awe and fear, or, equally satisfying, a perfect reflection of his own – flat, remorseless, as impervious to every deceit the enemy might attempt as he himself was.

Untroubled, then, he gestured to two burly Patriotists who stepped forward and kicked in the door. It virtually flew off its flimsy hinges, crashing down into the opulent chamber beyond. A scream, then another, from the gloom to the left – where the handmaidens slept – but already the lead agents were crossing the room to the door opposite. More violence, wood splintering beneath heavy boots.

Sprawled in the hallway behind Sirryn was the corpse of a Tiste Edur – someone had set a guard. Curious, but of little consequence. Poisoned quarrels had proved both quick and virtually silent. Already two of his men were preparing to carry the corpse away – just one more Edur who mysteriously vanished.

Sirryn Kanar positioned himself in the centre of the first chamber, as another agent arrived with a hooded lantern to stand off to one side, shedding just enough light. Too much would not do – the shadows needed to be alive, writhing, confusion on all sides. Sirryn delighted in precision.

His men emerged from the inner room, a figure between them – half naked, hair tousled, a look of disbelief— No. Sirryn Kanar's eyes narrowed. Not disbelief. *Resignation. Good, the traitor knew her fate, knew she could never escape it.* Saying nothing, he gestured for his agents to take her out.

Three handmaidens, weeping now, huddled against the wall, near their sleeping pallets. 'Attend to them,' Sirryn commanded, and four from his squad moved towards them. 'The senior one will be questioned, the other two disposed of immediately.'

He looked around, pleased at the ease of this operation, barely noticing the death-cries of two women.

In a short while, he would deliver his two prisoners to the squad waiting at a side postern of the palace, who would move quickly through the night – alone on the streets this long after curfew – to the headquarters of the Patriotists. Deliver the two women into interrogation cells. And the work would begin, the only release from the ordeal full confession of their crimes against the empire.

A simple, straightforward procedure. Proven effective. Traitors were invariably weak of will.

And Sirryn Kanar did not think the First Concubine would be any different. If anything, even more flimsy of spirit than most.

Women delighted in their airs of mystery, but those airs vanished before the storm of a man's will. True, whores hid things better than most – behind an endless succession of lies that never fooled him. He knew they were contemptuous of him and men like him, believing him weak by simple virtue of his using them – as if that use came from actual, genuine need. But he had always known how to wipe the smirks from their painted faces.

He envied the interrogators. That bitch Nisall – she was no different from his wife, he suspected.

*Our enemies are legion, Karos Invictad had said, so you must understand, all of you – this war, it will last for ever. For ever.*

Sirryn Kanar was content with that notion. Kept things simple.

*And it is our task*, the Master of the Patriotists had continued, *to ensure that. So that we are never expendable*.

Somewhat more confusing, that part, but Sirryn felt no real compulsion to pursue the notion. Karos was very clever, after all. *Clever and on our side. The right side.*

His thoughts shifting to the bed that awaited him, and the whore he'd have delivered to him there, the lieutenant marched down the empty palace corridor, his men falling in behind him.

Bruthen Trana stepped into the chamber. His eyes settled on the corpses of the two handmaidens. 'How long ago?' he asked the Arapay warlock who was crouched over the bodies. Two other Edur entered the First Concubine's bedroom, emerged again a moment later.

The warlock muttered something inaudible under his breath, then said in a louder voice, 'A bell, perhaps. Shortswords. The kind used by the Palace Guard.'

'Gather ten more warriors,' Bruthen Trana said. 'We are marching to the headquarters of the Patriotists.'

The warlock slowly straightened. 'Shall I inform Hannan Mosag?'

'Not yet. We cannot delay here. Sixteen Edur warriors and a warlock should suffice.'

'You mean to demand the release of the woman?'

'There are two, yes?'

A nod.

'They will begin interrogations immediately,' Bruthen Trana said. 'And that is not a pleasant procedure.'

'And if they have wrung confessions from them?'

'I understand your concern, K'ar Penath. Do you fear violence this night?'

The other warriors in the chamber had paused, eyes fixed on the Arapay warlock.

'Fear? Not in the least. With confessions in hand, however, Karos Invictad and, by extension, Triban Gnol, will be able to assert righteous domain—'

'We are wasting time,' Bruthen Trana cut in. 'My patience with Karos Invictad is at an end.' *And where is the guard I set in the hallway outside? As if I cannot guess.*

A new voice spoke from the outer doorway: 'Personal enmity, Bruthen Trana, is a very dangerous guide to your actions.'

The Tiste Edur turned.

The Chancellor, with two bodyguards hovering in the corridor behind him, stood with hands folded. After a moment he took a step into the room and looked about. An expression of regret when he saw the two dead women. 'Clearly, there was some resistance. They were most loyal servants to the First Concubine, probably innocent of all wrongdoing – this is tragic indeed. Blood on Nisall's hands now.'

Bruthen Trana studied the tall, thin man for a long moment, then he walked past him and out into the hall.

Neither bodyguard was suspicious, and neither had time to draw their weapons before the Edur's knives – one in each hand – slid up under their jaws, points driven deep into their brains. Leaving the weapons embedded, Bruthen Trana spun round, both hands snapping out to grasp the Chancellor's heavy brocaded collar. The Letherii gasped as he was yanked from his feet, flung round to face Bruthen, then slammed hard against the corridor's opposite wall.

'My patience with you,' the Edur said in a low voice, 'is at an end as well. Tragic demise for your bodyguards. Blood on your hands, alas. And I am not of a mind, presently, to forgive you their deaths.'

Triban Gnol's feet dangled, the stiff-tipped slippers kicking lightly against Bruthen Trana's shins. The Letherii's face was darkening, eyes bulging as they stared into the Edur's hard, cold gaze.

*I should kill him now. I should stand here and watch him suffocate in the drawn folds of his own robe. Better yet, retrieve a knife and slice open his guts – watch them tumble onto the floor.*

Behind him, K'ar Penath said, 'Commander, as you said, we've no time for this.'

Baring his teeth, Bruthen Trana flung the pathetic man aside. An awkward fall: Triban Gnol threw a hand down to break his descent, and the snap of finger bones – like iron nails driven into wood – was followed immediately by a gasp and squeal of pain.

Gesturing for his warriors to follow, Bruthen Trana stepped over the Chancellor and marched quickly down the corridor.

As the footfalls echoed away, Triban Gnol, clutching one hand against his torso, slowly climbed to his feet. He glared down the now empty corridor. Licked dry lips, then hissed, 'You will die for that, Bruthen Trana. You and every other witness who stood back and did nothing. You will all die.'

Could he warn Karos Invictad in time? Not likely. Well, the Master of the Patriotists was a capable man. With more than just two incompetent, pathetic bodyguards. Perfunctory notes to their widows: *Your husbands failed in their responsibilities. No death-pensions will be forthcoming. Leave the family residences of the Palace Guard immediately – barring your eldest child who is now Indebted to the estate of the Chancellor.*

He despised incompetence – and to be made to suffer its consequences . . . well, someone paid. Always. *Two children, then, yes. Hopefully boys.* And now he would need two new bodyguards. From among the married guard, of course. *Someone to pay the debt should they fail me.*

His broken fingers were growing numb, although a heavy ache throbbed in his wrist and forearm now.

The Chancellor set off for the residence of his private healer.

Her nightgown half torn, Nisall was pushed into a windowless room that was lit by a single candle positioned on a small table in the centre. The chill, damp air stank of old fear and human waste. Shivering from the night's march through the streets, she stood unmoving for a moment, seeking to wrap the gauze-thin material closer about herself.

Two young innocent women were dead. Butchered like criminals. *And Tissin is next – as close to a mother as I have ever had. She has done nothing – no, stop that. None of us have. But that doesn't matter – I cannot think otherwise. I cannot pretend that anything I say will make a difference, will in any way change my fate. No, this is a death sentence. For me. For Tissin.*

The Emperor would not hear of this. She was certain of that. Triban Gnol would announce that she was missing from the palace. That she had fled – just one more betrayal. Rhulad would flinch back in his throne, seeming to shrink in upon himself, as the Chancellor carefully, remorselessly fed the Emperor's many insecurities, then stood back to observe how his poisoned words stole the life from Rhulad's tortured eyes.

*We cannot win against this. They are too clever, too ruthless. Their only desire is to destroy Rhulad – his mind – to leave him gibbering, beset by*

*unseen terrors, unable to do anything, unwilling to see anyone. Anyone who might help him.*

*Errant save him—*

The door was thrown open, swinging to slam hard against the wall, where old cracks showed that this violent announcement was part of the pattern. But she had noted those, and so did not start at the cracking crunch, but merely turned to face her tormentor.

None other than Karos Invictad himself. A swirl of crimson silks, onyx rings on his fingers, the sceptre of his office held in one hand and resting between right shoulder and clavicle. A look of faint dismay in the mundane features. 'Dearest woman,' he said in his high voice, 'let us be quick about this, so that I can be merciful. I've no wish to damage you, lovely as you are. Thus, a signed statement outlining your treason against the empire, then a quick, private execution. Your handmaiden has already complied, and has been mercifully decapitated.'

*Oh, well done, Tissin.* Yet she herself struggled, seeking similar courage – to accept things as they were, to recognize that no other recourse was possible. 'Decapitation is not damage?'

An empty smile. 'The damage I was referring to, of course, concerned wresting from you your confession. Some advice: compose your features in the moment before the blade descends. It is an unfortunate fact that the head lives on a few moments after it has been severed from the neck. A few blinks, a roll or two of the eyes, and, if one is not . . . mindful, a rash of unpleasant expressions. Alas, your handmaiden was disinclined to heed such advice, too busy as she was with a pointless tirade of curses.'

'Pray the Errant heard her,' Nisall said. Her heart was thudding hard against her ribs.

'Oh, she did not curse me in the Errant's name, sweet whore. No, instead she revealed a faith long believed to be extinct. Did you know her ancestry was Shake? By the Holds, I cannot even recall the name of the god she uttered.' He shrugged and smiled his empty smile once more. 'No matter. Indeed, even had she called upon the Errant, I would have no cause to

panic. Coddled as you are – or, rather, were – in the palace, you are probably unaware that the handful of temples in the city purportedly sanctified in the Errant's name are in truth private and wholly secular – businesses, in fact, profiting from the ignorance of citizens. Their priests and priestesses are actors one and all. I sometimes wonder if Ezgara Diskanar even knew – he seemed oddly devoted to the Errant.' He paused, then sighed. The sceptre began tapping in place. 'You seek to delay the inevitable. Understandable, but I have no wish to remain here all night. I am sleepy and desire to retire at the earliest opportunity. You look chilled, Nisall. And this is a dreadful room, after all. Let us return to my office. I have a spare robe that is proof against any draught. And writing materials at hand.' He gestured with the sceptre and turned about.

The door opened and Nisall saw two guards in the corridor.

Numbed, she followed Karos Invictad.

Up a flight of stairs, down a passageway, then into the man's office. As promised, Karos Invictad found a cloak and set it carefully on Nisall's shoulders.

She drew it tight.

He waved her to a chair in front of the huge desk, where waited a sheet of vellum, a horsehair brush and a pot of squid ink. Slightly off to one side of the ink pot was a small, strange box, opened at the top. Unable to help herself, Nisall leaned over for a look.

'That is none of your concern.' The words were a pitch higher than usual and she glanced over to see the man scowling.

'You have a pet insect,' Nisall said, wondering at the flush of colour in Karos Invictad's face.

'Hardly. As I said, not your concern.'

'Do you seek a confession from it as well? You will have to decapitate it twice. With a very small blade.'

'Are you amusing yourself, woman? Sit down.'

Shrugging, she did as he commanded. Stared down at the blank vellum, then reached over and collected the brush. Her hand trembled. 'What is it you wish me to confess?'

'You need not be specific. You, Nisall, admit to conspiring against the Emperor and the empire. You state this freely and with sound mind, and submit to the fate awaiting all traitors.'

She dipped the brush into the ink and began writing.

'I am relieved you are taking this so well,' Karos Invictad said.

'My concern is not for me,' she said as she completed the terse statement and signed it with a flourish that did not quite succeed in hiding the shakiness of her hand. 'It is for Rhulad.'

'He will spare you nothing but venom, Nisall.'

'Again,' she said, leaning back in the chair. 'I do not care for myself.'

'Your sympathy is admirable—'

'It extends to you, Karos Invictad.'

He reached out and collected the vellum, waved it in the air to dry the ink. 'Me? Woman, you insult me—'

'Not intended. But when the Emperor learns that you executed the woman who carried his heir, well, Master of the Patriotists or not . . .'

The vellum dropped from the man's fingers. The sceptre ceased its contented tapping. Then, a rasp: 'You lie. Easily proved—'

'Indeed. Call in a healer. Presumably you have at least one in attendance, lest the executioner be stung by a sliver – or, more likely, a burst blister, busy as he is.'

'When we discover your ruse, Nisall, well, the notion of mercy is dispensed with, regardless of this signed confession.' He leaned over and collected the vellum. Then scowled. 'You used too much ink – it has run and is now illegible.'

'Most missives I pen are with stylus and wax,' she said.

He slapped the sheet back down in front of her, the reverse side up. 'Again. I will be back in a moment – with the healer.'

She heard the door open and shut behind her. Writing out her confession once more, she set the brush down and rose. Leaned over the odd little box with its pivoting two-headed insect. *Round and round you go. Do you know dismay? Helplessness?*

A commotion somewhere below. Voices, something crashing to the floor.

The door behind her was flung open.

She turned.

Karos Invictad walked in, straight for her.

She saw him twist the lower half of the sceptre, saw a short knife-blade emerge from the sceptre's base.

Nisall looked up, met the man's eyes.

And saw, in them, nothing human.

He thrust the blade into her chest, into her heart. Then twice more as she sagged, falling to strike the chair.

She saw the floor come up to meet her face, heard the crack of her forehead, felt the vague sting, then darkness closed in. *Oh, Tissin—*

Bruthen Trana shouldered a wounded guard aside and entered Invictad's office.

The Master of the Patriotists was stepping back from the crumpled form of Nisall, the sceptre in his hand – the blade at its base – gleaming crimson. 'Her confession demanded—'

The Tiste Edur walked to the desk, kicking aside the toppled chair. He picked up the sheet of vellum, squinted to make out the Letherii words. A single line. A statement. A confession indeed. For a moment, he felt as if his heart stuttered.

In the corridor, Tiste Edur warriors. Bruthen Trana said without turning, 'K'ar Penath, collect the body of the First Concubine—'

'This is an outrage!' Karos Invictad hissed. '*Do not touch her!* '

Snarling, Bruthen Trana took one stride closer to the man, then lashed out with the back of his left hand.

Blood sprayed as Karos Invictad staggered, sceptre flying, his shoulder striking the wall – more blood, from mouth and nose, a look of horror in the man's eyes as he stared down at the spatter on his hands.

From the corridor, a warrior spoke in the Edur language. 'Commander. The other woman has been beheaded.'

Bruthen Trana carefully rolled the sheet of vellum and slipped it beneath his hauberk. Then he reached out and dragged Karos Invictad to his feet.

He struck the man again, then again. Gouts of blood, broken teeth, threads of crimson spit.

Again. Again.

The reek of urine.

Bruthen Trana took handfuls of the silk beneath the flaccid neck and shook the Letherii, hard, watching the head snap back and forth. He kept shaking him.

Until a hand closed on his wrist.

Through a red haze, Bruthen Trana looked over, met the calm eyes of K'ar Penath.

'Commander, if you continue so with this unconscious man, you will break his neck.'

'Your point, warlock?'

'The First Concubine is dead, by his hand. Is it for you to exact this punishment?'

'Sister take you,' Bruthen Trana growled, then he flung Karos Invictad to the floor. 'Both bodies come with us.'

'Commander, the Chancellor—'

'Never mind him, K'ar Penath. Wrap well the bodies. We return to the Eternal Domicile.'

'What of the dead Letherii below?'

'His guards? What of them? They chose to step into our path, warlock.'

'As you say. But with their healer dead, some of them will bleed out unless we call upon—'

'Not our concern,' Bruthen Trana said.

K'ar Penath bowed. 'As you say, Commander.'

Half blind with terror, Tanal Yathvanar approached the entrance to the headquarters. She was gone. Gone, from that place, that most hidden place – her shackle snapped, the iron bent and twisted, the links of the chain parted as if they were nothing but damp clay.

*Karos Invictad, it was your work. Again. Yet another warning to me – do as you command. You know all, you see all. For you, nothing but games, ones where you make certain you always win. But she was not a game. Not for me, you bastard. I loved her – where is she? What have you done with her?*

Slowly, it registered upon him that something was amiss. Guards running in the compound. Shouts, wavering torchlight. The front entrance to the building yawned wide – he saw a pair of boots, attached to motionless legs, prone across the threshold.

*Errant take us, we have been attacked!*

He hurried forward.

A guard emerged, stepping over the body.

'You!' shouted Tanal. 'What has happened here?'

A rough salute. The man's face was pale. 'We have called for healers, sir —'

'What has happened, damn you?'

'Edur – a vicious ambush – we did not expect—'

'The Master?'

'Alive. But beaten badly. *Beaten, sir, by a Tiste Edur!* The liaison – Trana – Bruthen Trana—'

Tanal Yathvanar pushed past the fool, into the hallway, to the stairs. More bodies, guards cut down without so much as their weapons drawn. *What initiated this from the Edur? Did they catch word of our investigations? Bruthen Trana – does his file remain? Damn him, why didn't he just kill the bastard? Choke the life from him – make his face as red as those damned silks? Oh, I would run this differently indeed. Given the chance—*

He reached the office, stumbled to a halt upon seeing the spattered blood on the walls, the pools of it on the floor. The reek of piss was heavy in the air. Looking small and broken, Karos Invictad sat hunched in his oversized chair, stained cloths held to his swollen, bruised face. In the man's eyes, a rage as sharp as diamonds. Fixing now upon Tanal Yathvanar.

'Master! Healers are on the way—'

From mashed lips, muffled words: '*Where were you?* '

'What? Why, at home. In bed.'

'We arrested Nisall tonight.'

Tanal looked about. 'I was not informed, sir—'

'No – *no-one could find you!* Not at your home – not anywhere!'

'Sir, has Bruthen Trana retrieved the whore, then?'

A hacking, muffled laugh. 'Oh yes. Her cold flesh – but not her spirit. But he carries her written confession – by the Holds, it hurts to speak! *He broke my face!* '

*And how many times did your fist do the same to a prisoner?* 'Will you risk some wine, sir?'

A glare above the cloths, then a sharp nod.

Tanal went quickly to the cabinet. Found a clay jug containing undiluted wine. *A better smell than – the piss of your terror, little man.* He poured a goblet, then hesitated – and poured another for himself. *Damn you, why not?* 'The healers will be here soon – I informed the guards that any delay risks their lives.'

'Swift-thinking Tanal Yathvanar.'

He carried the goblet over to Karos Invictad, not sure if there was irony in that last statement, so distorted was the voice. 'The guards were struck unawares – vicious betrayal—'

'Those that aren't yet dead will wish they were,' the Master of the Patriotists said. 'Why weren't we warned? Chancellor or no, I will have his answer.'

'I did not think we'd take the whore yet,' Tanal said, retrieving his own wine. He watched over the rim of the goblet as Karos pulled the soaked cloth away, revealing the terrible assault done on his face as he gingerly sipped at the wine – wincing as the alcohol bit into gashes and cuts. 'Perhaps the Edur should have been first. Bruthen Trana – he did not seem such a viper. He said not a word, revealed nothing—'

'Of course not. Nor would I in his place. No. Wait, observe, then strike without warning. Yes, I underestimated him. Well, such a failing occurs but once. Tonight, Tanal Yathvanar, a war has begun. And this time the Letherii will not lose.' Another sip. 'I am relieved,' he then said, 'that you got rid of that academic – too bad you did not get Nisall to play with, but I needed to act quickly. Tell me how you disposed of her – the academic. I need some satisfying news for a change . . .'

Tanal stared at the man. *If not you . . .*

From the corridor, rushing feet. The healers had arrived.

'Commander,' K'ar Penath said as he hurried alongside Bruthen Trana, 'do we seek audience with the Emperor?'

'No. Not yet. We will watch all of this play out for a time.'

'And the bodies?'

'Hide them well, warlock. And inform Hannan Mosag that I wish to speak to him. As soon as possible.'

'Sir, he is not in the Emperor's favour at the moment—'

'You misunderstand me, warlock. This has nothing to do with Rhulad. Not yet. We conquered this empire. It seems the Letherii have forgotten that. The time has come to stir the Tiste Edur awake once more. To deliver terror, to make our displeasure clear. This night, K'ar, the weapons are drawn.'

'You speak of civil war, Commander.'

'In a manner of speaking, although I expect nothing overt from the Chancellor or Invictad. A war, yes, but one waged behind the Emperor's back. He will know nothing—'

'Commander—'

'Your shock at my words does not convince me. Hannan Mosag is no fool – nor are you or any of his other warlocks. Tell me now you anticipated nothing . . . ah, I thought as much.'

'I fear we are not ready—'

'We aren't. But neither were they. This taking Nisall – *this murder* – tells me something gave them reason to panic. We need to find out what. Something has happened, or is happening even now, that forced matters to a head. And that is the trail Hannan Mosag must pursue – no, I do not presume to command him—'

'I understand, Bruthen Trana. You speak as a Tiste Edur. I will support your advice to the Warlock King with all my zeal.'

'Thank you.'

'Tonight, Commander,' K'ar Penath said, 'in witnessing you . . . I was proud. We are . . . awakened, as you said. This civilization, it is a poison. A rot upon our souls. It must be excised.'

*And now I hear Hannan Mosag speaking through you, warlock. Answering other . . . suspicions. So be it.*

*Nisall. First Concubine, I am sorry. But know this, I will avenge you in truth. As I will avenge my brave warrior – Sister take me, that was careless —*

'The Chancellor will speak to the Emperor—'

'Only if he is stupid,' Bruthen Trana said, 'or inclined to panic. He is neither. No, he needs to be pushed, kept off balance – oh, we will deliver panic, yes, and sooner or later he will do as you say. Speak to Rhulad. And then we will have him. And Invictad. Two snakes in the same basket – a basket soaked in oil. And it will be Triban Gnol himself who strikes the spark.'

'How?'

'You will see.'

* * *

Tehol stared down through the roof hatch in unmitigated horror. 'That was a mistake,' he said.

Leaning beside him, also looking down, Bugg nodded. 'It was an act of mercy, Master. Twelve hens in a sack, half crushing each other, jostled about in fetid darkness. There was the risk of suffocation.'

'Precisely! Peaceful demise, remote, unseen. No wringing of necks required! But now look at them! They've taken over our room! My house. My abode, my very hearth—'

'About that – seems one of them has caught fire, Master.'

'It's smouldering, and too brainless to care. If we wait we can dine on roast chicken for breakfast. And which one laid that egg?'

'Hmm, a most gravid mystery indeed.'

'You may find this amusing right now, Bugg, but you are the one who will be sleeping down there. They'll peck your eyes out, you know. Evil has been bred into them, generation after generation, until their tiny black bean brains are condensed knots of malice—'

'You display unexpected familiarity with hens, Master.'

'I had a tutor who was a human version.'

Bugg leaned back and glanced over at the woman sleeping in Tehol's bed.

'Not her. Janath was only mildly vicious, as properly befits all instructors, plagued as they often are by mewling, lovestruck, pimply-faced students.'

'Oh, Master, I am sorry.'

'Be quiet. We're not talking about that. No, instead, Bugg, my house has been invaded by rabid hens, because of your habit of taking in strays and the like.'

'Strays? We're going to eat those things.'

'No wonder strays avoid you these days. Listen to them – how will we sleep with all that racket going on?'

'I suppose they're happy, Master. And in any case they are taking care of that cockroach infestation really fast.'

Creaking from the bed behind them drew their attention.

The scholar was sitting up, looking about in confusion.

Tehol hastily pushed Bugg towards her.

She frowned as the old man approached. 'Where am I? Who are you? Are we on a roof?'

'What do you last recall?' Bugg asked.

'Being alone. In the dark. He moved me . . . to a new place.'

'You have been freed,' he said.

Janath was examining her shapeless, rough tunic. 'Freed,' she said in a low voice.

'That shift was all we could find at short notice,' Bugg said. 'Of course, we will endeavour to, uh, improve your apparel as soon as we are able.'

'I have been healed.'

'Your physical wounds, yes.'

Grimacing, she nodded. 'The other kind is rather more elusive.'

'You seem remarkably . . . sound, Janath.'

She glanced up at him. 'You know me.'

'My master was once a student of yours.' He watched as she sought to look past him, first to one side, then the other. Bemused, Bugg turned, to see Tehol moving back and forth in an effort to keep the manservant between himself and the woman on the bed. 'Tehol? What are you doing?'

'Tehol? Tehol Beddict?'

Bugg spun round again, to see Janath gathering her tunic and stretching it out here and there in an effort to cover as much of her body as she could.

'That lecherous, pathetic worm? Is that you, Tehol? Hiding there behind this old man? Well, you certainly haven't changed, have you? Get out here, front and centre!'

Tehol stepped into view. Then bridled. 'Hold on, I am no longer your student, Janath! Besides, I'm well over you, I'll have you know. I haven't dreamt of you in . . . in . . . years! Months!'

Her brows rose. 'Weeks?'

Tehol drew himself straighter. 'It is well known that an adult man's adolescent misapprehensions often insinuate themselves when said man is sleeping, in his dreams, I mean. Or, indeed, nightmares—'

'I doubt I feature in your nightmares, Tehol,' Janath said. 'Although you do in mine.'

'Oh, really. I was no more pathetic than any other pathetic, lovestruck student. Was I?'

To that she said nothing.

Bugg said to her, 'You are indeed on a roof—'

'Above a chicken coop?'

'Well, as to that. Are you hungry?'

'The fine aroma of roasting chicken is making my mouth water,' she replied. 'Oh, please, have you no other clothes? I have no doubt at all what is going on in my former student's disgusting little brain right now.'

'Come the morning,' Bugg said, 'I will pay a visit to Selush – her wardrobe, while somewhat abysmal in taste, is nonetheless extensive.'

'Want my blanket?' Tehol asked her.

'Gods below, Master, you're almost leering.'

'Don't be insane, Bugg. I was making light. Ha ha, we're trapped in a dearth of attire. Ha ha. After all, what if that had been a child's tunic?'

In a deadpan voice, Janath said, 'What if it had.'

'Errant's blessing,' Tehol said with a loud sigh, 'these summer nights are hot, aren't they?'

'I know one hen that would agree with you,' Bugg noted, walking back to the hatch, from which a column of smoke was now rising.

'Tehol Beddict,' said Janath, 'I am glad you are here.'

'You are?' both Bugg and Tehol asked.

She nodded, not meeting their eyes. 'I was going mad – I thought I had already done so. Yathvanar – he beat me, he raped me . . . and told me of his undying love all the while. So, Tehol, you are as his opposite – harmless in your infatuation. You remind me of better days.' She was silent for a long moment. 'Better days.'

Bugg and Tehol exchanged a look, then the manservant made his way down the ladder. From above he heard Tehol say, 'Janath, are you not impressed with what I have done with my extensive education?'

'It is a very fine roof, Tehol Beddict.'

Nodding to himself, Bugg went in search of roasted chicken through clouds of acrid smoke. Surrounded on all sides by mindless clucking. *Abyss take me, I might as well be in a temple . . .*

The morning sun pushed through the slats on the shutters, stretching ribbons of light across the long, heavy table dominating the council room. Wiping his hands with a cloth, Rautos Hivanar entered and moved to stand behind his chair at one end of the table. He set the cloth down and studied the arrayed faces turned towards him – and saw in more than one expressions of taut fear and anxiety.

'My friends, welcome. Two matters on the agenda. We will first address the one that I suspect is foremost in your minds at the moment. We have reached a state of crisis – the dearth of hard coin, of silver, of gold, of cut gems and indeed of copper bars, is now acute. Someone is actively sabotaging our empire's economy—'

'We knew this was coming,' interrupted Uster Taran. 'Yet what measures were taken by the Consign? As far as I can see, none. Rautos Hivanar, as much on the minds of those assembled here is the question of your continued position as Master.'

'I see. Very well, present to me your list of concerns in that regard.'

Uster's craggy face reddened. 'List? Concerns? Errant take us, Rautos, have you not even set the Patriotists on the trail of this mad creature? Or creatures? Could this not be an effort from the outside – from one of the border kingdoms – to destabilize us prior to invasion? News of this Bolkando Conspiracy should have—'

'A moment, please. One issue at a time, Uster. The Patriotists are indeed pursuing an investigation, without result to date. A general announcement to that effect, while potentially alleviating your anxieties, would have been,

in my judgement, equally likely to trigger panic. Accordingly, I chose to keep the matter private. My own inquiries, in the meantime, have led me to eliminate external sources to this financial assault. The source, my friends, is here in Letheras—'

'Then why haven't we caught the bastard?' demanded Druz Thennict, his head seeming to bob atop its long, thin neck.

'The trails are most cleverly obscured, good Druz,' said Rautos. 'Quite simply, we are at war with a genius.'

From the far end of the table, Horul Rinnesict snorted, then said, 'Why not just mint more coins and take the pressure off?'

'We could,' Rautos replied, 'although it would not be easy. There is a fixed yield from the Imperial Mines and it is, of necessity, modest. And, unfortunately, rather inflexible. Beyond that concern, you might ask yourself: what would I do then, were I this saboteur? A sudden influx of new coin? If you sought to create chaos in the economy, what would you do?'

'Release my hoard,' Barrakta Ilk said in a growl, 'setting off runaway inflation. We'd be drowning in worthless coin.'

Rautos Hivanar nodded. 'It is my belief that our saboteur cannot hide much longer. He or she will need to become overt. The key will lie in observing which enterprise is the first to topple, for it is there that his or her trail will become readily discernible.'

'At which point,' said Barrakta, 'the Patriotists will pounce.'

'Ah, this leads me into the second subject. There has, I understand, been news from Drene – no, I have no specifics as yet, but it seems to have triggered something very much like panic among the Patriotists. Last night, here in Letheras, a number of unprecedented arrests occurred—'

Uster laughed. 'What could be unprecedented about the Patriotists arresting people?'

'Well, foremost among them was the First Concubine.'

Silence around the table.

Rautos Hivanar cleared his throat, working hard to keep the fury from his voice. 'It seems Karos Invictad acted in haste, which, as I am sure you all know, is quite unlike him. As a result, things went awry. There was a clash, both inside and outside the Eternal Domicile, between the Patriotists and the Tiste Edur.'

'That damned fool!' bellowed Barrakta, one fist pounding on the tabletop.

'The First Concubine is, I understand, dead. As are a number of guards – primarily those in the Patriotist compound, and at least two bodyguards to the Chancellor.'

'Has that damned snake turned suicidal as well?'

'It almost seems so, Barrakta,' Rautos conceded. 'All very troubling – especially Karos Invictad's reluctance to be forthcoming on what exactly happened. The only hint I possess of just how extreme events were last night is a rumour that Karos was beaten, nearly to death. I cannot confirm that rumour, since he was seeing no-one, and besides, no doubt healers visited in the aftermath.'

'Rautos,' murmured Druz, 'do we need to distance ourselves from the Patriotists?'

'It is worth considering,' Rautos replied. 'You might wish to begin preparations in that regard. In the meantime, however, we need the Patriotists, but I admit to worry that they may prove lacking come the day we most need their services.'

'Hire our own,' Barrakta said.

'I have done so.'

Sharp nods answered this quiet statement.

Uster Taran cleared his throat. 'My apologies, Rautos. You proceed on matters with your usual assurance. I regret my doubt.'

'As ever,' Rautos said, reaching once more for the cloth and wiping his hands, 'I welcome discourse. Indeed, even challenge. Lest I grow careless. Now, we need to assess the health of our own holdings, to give us all a better indication of our resilience . . .'

As the meeting continued, Rautos wiped at his hands again and again. A corpse had snagged on one of the mooring poles opposite the estate's landing this morning. Bloated and rotting, crawling with crayfish and seething with eels.

An occasional occurrence, but one that each time struck him with greater force, especially in the last few years. This morning it had been particularly bad, and though he had approached no closer than the uppermost tier in his yard, still it was as if some residue had reached him, making his hands oddly sticky – a residue that he seemed unable to remove, no matter how hard he tried.

# CHAPTER TEN

> The One God strode out – a puppet trailing severed strings – from the conflagration. Another city destroyed, another people cut down in their tens of thousands. Who among us, witnessing his emergence, could not but conclude that madness had taken him? For all the power of creation he possessed, he delivered naught but death and destruction. Stealer of Life, Slayer and Reaper, in his eyes where moments earlier there had been the blaze of unreasoning rage, now there was calm. He knew nothing. He could not resolve the blood on his own hands. He begged us for answers, but we could say nothing.
>
> We could weep. We could laugh.
>
> We chose laughter.
>
> *Creed of the Mockers*
> Cabal

Let's play a game, the wind whispered. Then it laughed in the soft hiss of dust and sand.

Hedge sat, listening, the crumbly stone block beneath him eroded into a saddle shape, comforting enough, all things considered. It might have been an altar once, fallen through some hole in the sky – Hood knew, enough strange objects had tumbled down from the low, impenetrable clouds during his long, meandering journey across this dire world. Some of them far too close for comfort.

Yes, probably an altar. The depression wherein resided his behind felt too even, too symmetrical to be natural. But he did not worry about blasphemy – this was, after all, where the dead went. And the dead included, on occasion, gods.

The wind told him as much. It had been his companion for so long, now, he had grown accustomed to its easy revelations, its quiet rasp of secrets and its caressing embrace. When he stumbled onto a scatter of enormous bones, hinting at some unhuman, monstrous god of long ago, the wind – as it slipped down among those bones, seeped between jutting ribs and slithered through orbitals and into the hollow caves of skulls – moaned that god's once-holy name. Names. It seemed they had so many, their utterances now and for ever more trapped in the wind's domain. Voiced in the swirl of dust, nothing but echoes now.

*Let's play a game.*

*There is no gate – oh, you've seen it, I well know.*

*But it is a lie. It is what your mind builds, stone by stone.*

*For your kind love borders. Thresholds, divisions, delineations. To enter a place you believe you must leave another. But look around and you can see. There is no gate, my friend.*

*I show you this. Again and again. The day you comprehend, the day wisdom comes to you, you will join me. The flesh that encompasses you is your final conceit. Abandon it, my love. You once scattered yourself and you will do so again. When wisdom arrives. Has wisdom arrived yet?*

The wind's efforts at seduction, its invitations to his accepting some kind of wilful dissolution, were getting irritating. Grunting, he pushed himself upright.

On the slope to his left, a hundred or more paces away, sprawled the skeleton of a dragon. Something had shattered its ribcage, puncturing blows driving shards and fragments inward – fatally so, he could see even from this distance. The bones looked strange, sheathed one and all in something like black, smoky glass. Glass that webbed down to the ground, then ran in frozen streams through furrows on the slope. As if the beast's melting flesh had somehow vitrified.

He had seen the same on the two other dragon remains he had come across.

He stood, luxuriating in his conceit – in the dull pain in his lower back, the vague earache from the insistent wind, and the dryness at the back of his throat that forced him to repeatedly clear it. Which he did, before saying, 'All the wonders and miseries of a body, wind, that is what you have forgotten. What you long for. You want me to join you? Ha, it's the other way round.'

*You will never win this game, my love—*

'Then why play it?'

He set off at an angle up the hillside. On the summit, he could see more stone rubble, the remnants of a temple that had dropped through a hole in the earth, plucked from mortal eyes in a conflagration of dust and thunder. Like cutting the feet out from under a god. Like obliterating a faith with a single slash of the knife. A hole in the earth, then, the temple's pieces tumbling through the Abyss, the ethered layers of realm after realm, until they ran out of worlds to plunge through.

Knock knock, right on Hood's head.

*Your irreverence will deliver unto you profoundest regret, beloved.*

'My profoundest regret, wind, is that it never rains here. No crashing descent of water – to drown your every word.'

*Your mood is foul today. This is not like you. We have played so many games together, you and I.*

'Your breath is getting cold.'

*Because you are walking the wrong way!*

'Ah. Thank you, wind.'

A sudden bitter gust buffeted him, evincing its displeasure. Grit stung his eyes, and he laughed. 'Hood's secret revealed, at last. Scurry on back to him, wind, you have lost this game.'

*You fool. Ponder this question: among the fallen, among the dead, will you find more soldiers – more fighters than nonfighters? Will you find more*

*men than women? More gods than mortals? More fools than the wise? Among the Fallen, my friend, does the echo of marching armies drown all else? Or the moans of the diseased, the cries of the starving?*

'I expect, in the end,' he said after a moment, 'it all evens out.'

*You are wrong. I must answer you, even though it will break your heart. I must.*

'There is no need,' he replied. 'I already know.'

*Do you?* whispered the wind.

'You want me to falter. In despair. I know your tricks, wind. And I know, too, that you are probably all that remains of some ancient, long-forgotten god. Hood knows, maybe you are all of them, their every voice a tangled mess, pushing dust and sand and little else. You want me to fall to my knees before you. In abject worship, because maybe then some trickle of power will come to you. Enough to make your escape.' He grunted a laugh. 'But this is for you to ponder, wind. Among all the fallen, why do you haunt *me*?'

*Why not? You boldly assert bone and flesh. You would spit in Hood's face – you would spit in mine if you could think of a way to dodge my spitting it right back.*

'Aye, I would at that. Which is my point. You chose wrongly, wind. Because I am a soldier.'

*Let's play a game.*

'Let's not.'

*Among the Fallen, who—*

'The answer is *children*, wind. More children than anyone else.'

*Then where is your despair?*

'You understand nothing,' he said, pausing to spit. 'For a man or a woman to reach adulthood, they must first kill the child within them.'

*You are a most vicious man, soldier.*

'You still understand nothing. I have just confessed my despair, wind. You win the game. You win every game. But I will march on, into your icy breath, because that's what soldiers do.'

*Odd, it does not feel as if I have won.*

On a flat stretch of cold but not yet frozen mud, he came upon tracks. Broad, flattened and bony feet, one set, heading in the same direction. Someone . . . seeking perhaps what he sought. Water pooled in the deep prints, motionless and reflecting the pewter sky.

He crouched down, studying the deep impressions. 'Be useful, wind. Tell me who walks ahead of me.'

*Silent. One who does not play.*

'Is that the best you can do?'

*Undead.*

He squinted down at the tracks, noting the wide, slightly misaligned gait, the faint streaks left by dangling tufts of hide, skins, whatever. 'T'lan Imass?'

*Broken.*

'Two, maybe three leagues ahead of me.'

*More. Water crawls slowly here.*

'I smell snow and ice.'

*My breath betrays all that I devour. Turn back to a sweeter kiss, beloved.*

'You mean the reek of fly-swarmed swamp I've endured for the past two months?' He straightened, adjusted his heavy pack.

*You are cruel. At least the one ahead says nothing. Thinks nothing. Feels nothing.*

'T'lan Imass for certain, then.'

*Broken.*

'Yes, I understood you the first time.'

*What will you do?*

'If need be, I will give you a gift, wind.'

*A gift? Oh, what is it?*

'A new game – you have to guess.'

*I will think and think and—*

'Hood's breath – oh – *oh*! Forget I just said that!'

*—and think and think . . .*

They rode hard, westward at first, paralleling the great river for most of two days, before reaching the feeder track that angled northerly towards Almas, a modest town distinguished only by its garrison and stables, where Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, Varat Taun and their Letherii company could rest, resupply and requisition fresh mounts.

Varat Taun knew flight when he saw it, when he found himself part of it. Away from Letheras, where, a day before their departure, the palace and barracks seemed caught in a rising storm of tension, the smell of blood heady in the air, a thousand rumours cavorting in all directions but none of them possessing much substance, beyond news relating the casting out of two families, the widows and children of two men who had been the Chancellor's bodyguards, and who were clearly no longer among the living.

Had someone tried to assassinate Triban Gnol? He'd wondered that out loud early in this journey and his commander had simply grunted, as if nothing in the notion surprised or even alarmed her. Of course she knew more than she was letting on, but Twilight had never been free with her words.

*Nor am I, it turns out. The horrors of what I witnessed in that cavern – no, nothing I can say could possibly convey the . . . the sheer extremity of the truth. So best leave it. The ones who will witness will not live long past the experience. What then will remain of the empire?*

*And is this not why we are running away?*

A foreigner rode with them. A Mocker, Yan Tovis had said, whatever that meant. A monk of some sort. *With the painted face of a cavorting mummer – what mad religion is that?* Varat Taun could not recall the strange little man saying a word – perhaps he was mute, perhaps his tongue had been cut out. Cultists did terrible things to themselves. The journey across the seas and oceans of the world had provided a seemingly endless pageantry of bizarre cultures and customs. No amount of self-mutilation in misguided service to some god would surprise Varat Taun. The Mocker had been among the challengers, but the absurdity of this was now obvious – after the first day of riding he had been exhausted, reeling in the saddle. He was, evidently, a healer.

*Who healed me. Who guided me out from the terror and confusion. I have spoken my gratitude, but he just nodded. Did he witness the visions in my mind? Is he now struck mute, his very sanity under siege?* In any case, he was no challenger to the Emperor, and that was why he now rode beside Yan Tovis, although what value she placed in this Mocker escaped the lieutenant.

*Perhaps it's no different from how she views me. I ride in this company in an act of mercy. Soon to be sent to a posting in my home city. To be with my wife and my child. Twilight is not thinking as an Atri-Preda – not even her duty as a soldier was enough to compel her to report what she had learned to her superiors.*

*But this is not the first time, is it? Why should I be surprised? She surrendered Fent Reach to the Edur, didn't she? No battle, they just opened the gates.*

*'Clearly, she loves the Edur so much she can go with them, to take command of the Letherii forces in the fleets.' So went the argument, dry and mocking.*

*The truth may be that Yan Tovis is a coward.*

Varat Taun did not like that thought, even as it now hounded him. He reminded himself of the battles, the skirmishes, both on water and ashore,

where there had been nothing – not a single moment – when he had been given cause to doubt her courage.

Yet here, now, she was fleeing Letheras with her elite company.

*Because I confirmed that Gral's claims. Besides, would I willingly stand beside Icarium again? No, not at his side, not in the same city, preferably not on the same damned continent. Does that make me a coward as well?*

There had been a child, in that cavern, a strange thing, more imp than human. And it had managed what no-one else could – taking down Icarium, stealing away his rage and all the power that came with it. Varat Taun did not think there would be another such intervention. The defenders of the First Throne had possessed allies. The Emperor in Gold could not but refuse the same. There would be no-one there to stop Icarium. No-one but Rhulad himself, which was of course possible.

*It is our lack of faith in our Emperor that has set us on this road.*

*But what if neither one will fall? What if Icarium finds himself killing Rhulad again and again? Ten times, fifty, a hundred – ten thousand? An endless succession of battles, obliterating all else. Could we not see the end of the world?*

*Icarium cannot yield. Rhulad will not. They will share that inevitability. And they will share the madness that comes of it.*

Bluerose would not be far enough away. *No place will.*

He had left behind the one man who understood what was coming better than anyone else. The barbarian. Who wore a heavy hood to hide his features when among strangers. Who spat on his hands to smooth back his hair. Who greeted each and every dawn with a litany of curses against all who had wronged him. *Yet, now, I see him in my mind as if looking upon a brother.*

*He and I alone survived. Together, we brought Icarium out.*

His thoughts had brought him to this moment, this conflation of revelations, and he felt his heart grow cold in his chest. Varat Taun pushed

his horse to a greater pace, until he came up alongside his commander. 'Atri-Preda.'

She looked across at him.

'I must go back,' he said.

'To warn them?'

'No, sir.'

'What of your family, Varat Taun?'

He glanced away. 'I have realized something. Nowhere is far enough.'

'I see. Then, would you not wish to be at her side?'

'Knowing I cannot save them . . .' Varat shook his head. 'The Gral and I – together – I don't know, perhaps we can do something – if we're there.'

'Can I talk you out of this?'

He shook his head.

'Very well. Errant's blessing on you, Varat Taun.'

'He is right,' said the Mocker behind them. 'I too must return.'

A heavy sigh gusted from Yan Tovis. 'So be it – I should have known better than to try to save anyone but myself – no, I'm not as bitter as that sounded. My apologies. You both have my blessing. Be sure to walk those horses on occasion, however.'

'Yes sir. Atri-Preda? Thank you.'

'What word do I send to your wife?'

'None, sir. Please.'

Yan Tovis nodded.

Varat Taun guided his mount off the road, reining in. The monk followed suited, somewhat more awkwardly. The lieutenant watched in some amusement. 'You have no horses in your lands?'

'Few. Cabal is an archipelago for the most part. The mainland holdings are on the sides of rather sheer cliffs, a stretch of coast that is severely mountainous. And what horses we do have are bred for labour and food.'

To that, Varat Taun said nothing.

They waited on the side of the track, watching the column of mounted soldiers ride past.

*Errant take me, what have I done?*

* * *

The lake stretched on with no end in sight. The three figures had rowed their well-provisioned boat for what passed for a day and most of a night in the Shadow Realm, before the craft ran aground in shallows. Unable to find a way past, they had shouldered the packs and disembarked, wading in silty, knee-deep water. Now, midway through the next day, they dragged exhausted, numbed legs through a calm lake that had been no deeper than their hips since dawn – until they reached a sudden drop-off.

Trull Sengar had been in the lead, using his spear to probe the waters ahead, and now he moved to one side, step by step, the butt of the weapon stirring the grey, milky silts along the edge. He continued on for a time, watched by his companions. 'Doesn't feel natural,' he finally said, making his way back to the others. 'The drop-away is smooth, even.' Moving past Onrack and Quick Ben, he resumed probing the ledge in the opposite direction. 'No change here.'

The wizard voiced a long, elaborate string of curses in his Malazan tongue, then said, 'I could take to the air, drawing on Serc – although how long I could manage that is anyone's guess.' He glared across at Onrack. 'You can just melt into silts, you damned T'lan Imass.'

'Leaving me,' said Trull, who then shrugged. 'I will swim, then – there may well be a resumption of the shallows ahead – you know, we've been walking on an unnaturally level bottom for some time. Imagine for the moment that we are on a submerged concourse of some sort – enormous,

granted, but still. This drop-off could simply mark a canal. In which case I should soon find the opposite side.'

'A concourse?' Quick Ben grimaced. 'Trull, if this is a concourse beneath us it's the size of a city-state.'

Onrack said, 'You will find one such construct, Wizard, covering the southeast peninsula of Stratem. K'Chain Che'Malle. A place where ritual wars were fought – before all ritual was abandoned.'

'You mean when the Short-Tails rebelled.'

Trull swore under his breath. 'I hate it when everyone knows more than me.' Then he snorted. 'Mind you, my company consists of a mage and an undead, so I suppose it's no surprise I falter in comparison.'

'Falter?' Onrack's neck creaked loud as the warrior turned to regard the Tiste Edur. 'Trull Sengar, you are the Knight of Shadow.'

Quick Ben seemed to choke.

Above the wizard's sudden fit of coughing, Trull shouted: 'I am *what*? Was this Cotillion's idea? That damned upstart—'

'Cotillion did not choose you, friend,' Onrack said. 'I cannot tell you who made you what you now are. Perhaps the Eres'al, although I do not comprehend the nature of her claim within the realm of Shadow. One thing, however, is very clear – she has taken an interest in you, Trull Sengar.

Even so, I do not believe the Eres'al was responsible. I believe you yourself were.'

'How? What did I do?'

The T'lan Imass slowly tilted its head to one side. 'Warrior, you stood before Icarium. You held the Lifestealer. You did what no warrior has ever done.'

'Absurd,' snapped Trull. 'I was finished. If not for Quick Ben here – and the Eres'al – I'd be dead, my chopped-up bones mouldering outside the throne room.'

'It is your way, my friend, to disarm your own achievements.'

'Onrack—'

Quick Ben laughed. 'He's calling you modest, Edur. And don't bother denying the truth of that – you still manage to startle me on that count. I've lived most of my life among mages or in the ranks of an army, and in neither company did I ever find much in the way of self-deprecation. We were all too busy pissing on each other's trees. One needs a certain level of, uh, bravado when it's your job to kill people.'

'Trull Sengar fought as a soldier,' Onrack said to the wizard. 'The difference between you two is that he is unable to hide his grief at the frailty of life.'

'Nothing frail about us,' Quick Ben muttered. 'Life stays stubborn until it has no choice but to give up, and even then it's likely to spit one last time in the eye of whatever's killed it. We're cruel in victory and cruel in defeat, my friends. Now, if you two will be quiet for a moment, I can go in search of a way out of here.'

'Not flying?' Trull asked, leaning on his spear.

'No, a damned gate. I'm beginning to suspect this lake doesn't end.'

'It must end,' the Edur said.

'The Abyss is not always twisted with wild storms. Sometimes it's like this – placid, colourless, a tide rising so slowly that it's impossible to notice, but rise it does, swallowing this tilted, dying realm.'

'The Shadow Realm is *dying*, Quick Ben?'

The wizard licked his lips – a nervous gesture Trull had seen before from the tall, thin man – then shrugged. 'I think so. With every border an open wound, it's not that surprising. Now, quiet everyone. I need to concentrate.'

Trull watched as Quick Ben closed his eyes.

A moment later his body grew indistinct, grainy at its edges, then began wavering, into and out of solidity.

The Tiste Edur, still leaning on his spear, grinned over at Onrack. 'Well, old friend, it seems we wander the unknown yet again.'

'I regret nothing, Trull Sengar.'

'It's virtually the opposite for me – with the exception of talking you into freeing me when I was about to drown in the Nascent – which, I've just realized, doesn't look much different from this place. Flooding worlds. Is this more pervasive than we realize?'

A clattering of bones as the T'lan Imass shrugged. 'I would know something, Trull Sengar. When peace comes to a warrior . . .'

The Edur's eyes narrowed on the battered undead. 'How do you just cast off all the rest? The surge of pleasure at the height of battle? The rush of emotions, each one threatening to overwhelm you, drown you? That sizzling sense of being alive? Onrack, I thought your kind felt . . . nothing.'

'With awakening memories,' Onrack replied, 'so too other . . . forces of the soul.' The T'lan Imass lifted one withered hand. 'This calm on all sides – it mocks me.'

'Better a wild storm?'

'I think, yes. A foe to fight. Trull Sengar, should I join this water as dust, I do not think I would return. Oblivion would take me with the promise of a struggle ended. Not what I desire, friend, for that would mean abandoning you. And surrendering my memories. Yet what does a warrior do when peace is won?'

'Take up fishing,' Quick Ben muttered, eyes still closed, body still wavering. 'Now enough words from you two. This isn't easy.'

Wavering once more in and out of existence, then, suddenly – gone.

Ever since Shadowthrone had stolen him away – when Kalam needed him the most – Quick Ben had quietly seethed. Repaying a debt in one direction had meant betraying a friend in another. Unacceptable.

*Diabolical.*

*And if Shadowthrone thinks he has my loyalty just because he pushed Kal into the Deadhouse, then he is truly as mad as we all think he is. Oh, I'm sure the Azath and whatever horrid guardian resides in there would welcome Kalam readily enough. Mount his head on the wall above the mantel, maybe – all right, that's not very likely. But the Azath collects. That's what it does, and now it has my oldest friend. So, how in Hood's name do I get him out?*

*Damn you, Shadowthrone.*

But such anger left him feeling unbalanced, making concentration difficult. *And the skin rotting from my legs isn't helping either.* Still, they needed a way out. Cotillion hadn't explained much. *No, he'd just expected us to figure things out for ourselves. What that means is that there's only one real direction. Wouldn't do to have us get lost now, would it?*

Slightly emboldened – a momentary triumph over diffidence – Quick Ben concentrated, his senses reaching out to the surrounding ether. Solid, clammy, a smooth surface yielding like sponge under the push of imagined hands. The fabric of this realm, the pocked skin of a ravaged world. He began applying more pressure, seeking . . . *soft spots, weaknesses – I know you exist.*

*Ah, you are now aware of me – I can feel that. Curious, you feel almost . . . feminine. Well, a first time for everything.* What had been clammy beneath his touch was now simply cool. *Hood's breath, I'm not sure I like the images accompanying this thought of pushing through.*

Beyond his sense of touch, there was nothing. Nothing for his eyes to find; no scent in the tepid air; no sound beyond the faint swish of blood in the body – there one moment, gone the next as he struggled to separate his soul, free it to wander.

*This isn't that bad—*

A grisly tearing sound, then a vast, inexorable inhalation, tearing his spirit loose – yanking him forward and through, stumbling, into acrid swirling heat, thick clouds closing on all sides, soft sodden ground underfoot. He

groped forward, his lungs filling with a pungent vapour that made his head reel. *Gods, what sickness is this? I can't breathe—*

The wind spun, drove him staggering forward – sudden chill, stones turning beneath his feet, blessed clean air that he sucked in with desperate gasps.

Down onto his hands and knees. On the rocky ground, lichen and mosses. On either side, a thinly spread forest in miniature – he saw oaks, spruce, alder, old and twisted and none higher than his hip. Dun-hued birds flitted among small green leaves. Midges closed in, sought to alight – but he was a ghost here, an apparition – *thus far. But this is where we must go.*

The wizard slowly lifted his head, then climbed to his feet.

He stood in a shallow, broad valley, the dwarf forest covering the basin behind him and climbing the slopes on all sides, strangely park-like in the generous spacing of the trees. And they swarmed with birds. From somewhere nearby came the sound of trickling water. Overhead, dragonflies with wingspans to match that of crows darted in their uncanny precision, feeding on midges. Beyond this feeding frenzy the sky was cerulean, almost purple near the horizons. Tatters of elongated clouds ran in high ribbons, like the froth of frozen waves on some celestial shore.

Primordial beauty – *tundra's edge. Gods, I hate tundra. But so be it, as kings and queens say when it's all swirled down the piss-hole. Nothing to be done for it. Here we must come*.

Trull Sengar started at the sudden coughing – Quick Ben had reappeared, half bent over, tears streaming from his eyes and something like smoke drifting from his entire body. He hacked, then spat and slowly straightened.

Grinning.

The proprietor of the Harridict Tavern was a man under siege. An affliction that had reached beyond months and into years. His establishment, once devoted to serving the island prison's guards, had since been usurped along with the rest of the port town following the prisoners' rebellion. Chaos now ruled, ageing honest folk beyond their years. But the money was good.

He had taken to joining Captain Shurq Elalle and Skorgen Kaban the Pretty at their preferred table in the corner during lulls in the mayhem, when the serving wenches and scull-boys rushed about with more purpose than panic, dull exhaustion replacing abject terror in their glazed eyes – and all seemed, for the moment, right and proper.

There was a certain calm with this here captain – *a pirate if the Errant pisses straight and he ain't missed yet* – and a marked elegance and civility to her manner that told the proprietor that she had stolen not just coins from the highborn but culture as well, which marked her as a smart, sharp woman.

He believed he was falling in love, hopeless as that was. Stress of the profession and too much sampling of inland ales had left him – in his honest, not unreasonably harsh judgement – a physical wreck to match his moral lassitude which on good days he called his *business acumen.* Protruding belly round as a stew pot and damned near as greasy. Bulbous nose – one up on Skorgen there – with burst veins, hair-sprouting blackheads and swirling bristles that reached down from the nostrils to entwine with his moustache – once a fashion among hirsute men but no more, alas. Watery close-set eyes, the whites so long yellow he was no longer sure they hadn't always been that colour. A few front teeth were left, four in all, one up top, three below. Better than his wife, then, who'd lost her last two stumbling into a wall while draining an ale casket – the brass spigot knocking the twin tombstones clean out of their sockets, and if she hadn't then choked on the damned things she'd still be with him, bless her. Times she was sober she'd work like a horse and bite just as hard and both talents did her well working the tables.

But life was lonely these days, wasn't it just, then in saunters this glorious, sultry pirate captain. A whole sight better than those foreigners, walking in and out of the Brullyg Shake's Palace as if it was their ancestral home, then spending their nights here, hunched down at the games table – the biggest table in the whole damned tavern, if you mind, with a single jug of ale to last the entire night no matter how many of them crowded round their strange, foreign, seemingly endless game.

Oh, he'd demanded a cut as was his right and they paid over peaceably enough – even though he could make no sense of the rules of play. And how those peculiar rectangular coins went back and forth! But the tavern's take wasn't worth it. A regular game of Bale's Scoop on any given night would yield twice as much for the house. And the ale quaffed – a player didn't need a sharp brain to play Bale's, Errant be praised. So these foreigners were worse than lumps of moss renting a rock, as his dear wife used to say whenever he sat down for a rest.

*Contemplating life, my love.* Contemplate this fist, dear husband. Wasn't she something, wasn't she just something. Been so quiet since that spigot punched her teeth down her throat.

'All right, Ballant,' Skorgen Kaban said in a sudden gust of beery breath, leaning over the table. 'You come and sit wi' us every damned night. And just sit. Saying nothing. You're the most tight-lipped tavernkeep I've ever known.'

'Leave the man alone,' the captain said. 'He's mourning. Grief don't need words for company. In fact, words is the last thing grief needs, so wipe your dripping nose, Pretty, and shut the toothy hole under it.'

The first mate ducked. 'Hey, I never knew nothing about grief, Captain.' He used the back of one cuff to blot at the weeping holes where his nose used to be, then said to Ballant, 'You just sit here, Keeper, and go on saying nothing to no-one for as long as you like.'

Ballant struggled to pull his adoring gaze from the captain, long enough to nod and smile at Skorgen Kaban, then looked back again to Shurq Elalle.

The diamond set in her forehead glittered in the yellowy lantern light like a knuckle sun, the jewel in her frown – oh, he'd have to remember that one – but she *was* frowning, and that was never good. Not for a woman.

'Pretty,' she now said in a low voice, 'you remember a couple of them Crimson Guard – in the squad? There was that dark-skinned one – sort of a more earthy colour than an Edur. And the other one, with that faint blue skin, some island mix, he said.'

'What about them, Captain?'

'Well.' She nodded towards the foreigners at the games table on the other side of the room. 'Them. Something reminds me of those two in Iron Bars's squad. Not just skin, but their gestures, the way they move – even some of the words I've overheard in that language they're speaking. Just . . . odd echoes.' She then fixed her dark but luminous gaze on Ballant. 'What do you know about them, Keeper?'

'Captain,' Skorgen objected, 'he's in mourning—'

'Be quiet, Pretty. Me and Ballant are having an inconsequential conversation.'

Yes, most inconsequential, even if that diamond blinded him, and that wonderful spicy aroma that was her breath made his head swim as if it was the finest liqueur. Blinking, he licked his lips – tasting sweat – then said, 'They have lots of private meetings with Brullyg Shake. Then they come down here and waste time.'

Even her answering grunt was lovely.

Skorgen snorted – wetly – then reached out with his one good hand and wiped clean the tabletop. 'Can you believe that, Captain? Brullyg an old friend of yours and you can't e'en get in to see him while a bunch of cheap foreigners can natter in his ear all day an' every day!' He half rose. 'I'm thinking a word with these here—'

'Sit down, Pretty. Something tells me you don't want to mess with that crowd. Unless you're of a mind to lose another part of your body.' Her frown deepened, almost swallowing that diamond. 'Ballant, you said they waste time, right? Now, that's the real curious part about all this. People like them don't waste time. No. They're waiting. For something or someone. And those meetings with the Shake – that sounds like negotiating, the kind of negotiating that Brullyg can't walk away from.'

'That don't sound good, Captain,' Skorgen muttered. 'In fact, it makes me nervous. Never mind avalanches of ice – Brullyg didn't run when that was coming down—'

Shurq Elalle thumped the table. 'That's it! Thank you, Pretty. It was something one of those women said. Brevity or Pithy – one of them. That ice was beaten back, all right, but not thanks to the handful of mages working for the Shake. No – those foreigners are the ones who saved this damned island. And that's why Brullyg can't bar his door against them. It isn't negotiation, because they're the ones doing all the talking.' She slowly leaned back. 'No wonder the Shake won't see me – Errant take us, I'd be surprised if he was still alive—'

'No, he's alive,' Ballant said. 'At least, people have seen him. Besides, he has a liking for Fent ale and orders a cask from me once every three days without fail, and that hasn't changed. Why, just yesterday—'

The captain leaned forward again. 'Ballant. Next time you're told to deliver one, let me and Pretty here do the delivering.'

'Why, I could deny you nothing, Captain,' Ballant said, then felt his face flush.

But she just smiled.

He liked these inconsequential conversations. Not much different from those he used to have with his wife. And . . . yes, here it was – that sudden sense of a yawning abyss awaiting his next step. Nostalgia rose within him, brimming his eyes.

Under siege, dear husband? One swing of this fist and those walls will come tumbling down – you do know that, husband, don't you?

Oh yes, my love.

Odd, sometimes he would swear she'd never left. Dead or not, she still had teeth.

Blue-grey mould filled pocks in the rotted ice like snow's own fur, shedding with the season as the sun's bright heat devoured the glacier. But winter, when it next came, would do little more than slow the inexorable disintegration. This river of ice was dying, an age in retreat.

Seren Pedac had scant sense of the age to come, since she felt she was drowning in its birth, swept along in the mud and refuse of long-frozen debris. Periodically, as their discordant, constantly bickering party climbed ever higher into the northern Bluerose Mountains, they would hear the thundering collapse of distant ice cliffs, calving beneath the besieging sun; and everywhere water streamed across bared rock, coughed its way along channels and fissures, swept past them in its descent into darkness – the journey to the sea just begun – swept past, to traverse subterranean caverns, shadowed gorges, sodden forests.

The mould was sporing, and that had triggered a recoil of Seren's senses – her nose was stuffed, her throat was dry and sore and she was racked with bouts of sneezing that had proved amusing enough to elicit even a sympathetic smile from Fear Sengar. That hint of sympathy alone earned her forgiveness – the pleasure the others took at her discomfort deserved nothing but reciprocation, when the opportunity arose, and she was certain it would.

Silchas Ruin, of course, was not afflicted with a sense of humour, in so far as she could tell. Or its dryness beggared a desert. Besides, he strode far enough ahead to spare himself her sneezing fits, with the Tiste Andii, Clip, only a few strides in his wake – like a sparrow harassing a hawk. Every now and then some fragment of Clip's monologue drifted back to where Seren and her companions struggled along, and while it was clear that he was baiting the brother of his god, it was equally evident that the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord was, as Udinaas had remarked, using the wrong bait.

Four days now, this quest into the ravaged north, climbing the spine of the mountains. Skirting huge masses of broken ice that slid – almost perceptibly – ever downslope, voicing terrible groans and gasps. *The leviathans are fatally wounded*, Udinaas once observed, *and will not go quietly.*

Melting ice exuded a stench beyond the acrid bite of the mould spores. Decaying detritus: vegetation and mud frozen for centuries; the withered corpses of animals, some of them beasts long extinct, leaving behind

twisted hides of brittle fur every whisper of wind plucked into the air, fractured bones and bulging cavities filled with gases that eventually burst, hissing out fetid breath. It was no wonder Seren Pedac's body was rebelling.

The migrating mountains of ice were, it turned out, cause for the near-panic among the Tiste Andii inhabitants of the subterranean monastery. The deep gorge that marked its entrance branched like a tree to the north, and back down each branch now crawled packed snow and enormous blocks of ice, with streams of meltwater providing the grease, ever speeding their southward migration. And there was fetid magic in that ice, remnants of an ancient ritual still powerful enough to defeat the Onyx Wizards.

Seren Pedac suspected that there was more to this journey, and to Clip's presence, than she and her companions had been led to believe. *We walk towards the heart of that ritual, to the core that remains. Because a secret awaits us there.*

*Does Clip mean to shatter the ritual? What will happen if he does?*

*And what if to do so ruins us? Our chances of finding the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye, of releasing it?*

She was beginning to dread this journey's end.

*There will be blood.*

Swathed in the furs the Andii had provided, Udinaas moved up alongside her. 'Acquitor, I have been thinking.'

'Is that wise?' she asked.

'Of course not, but it's not as if I can help it. The same for you, I am sure.'

Grimacing, she said, 'I have lost my purpose here. Clip now leads. I . . . I don't know why I am still walking in your sordid company.'

'Contemplating leaving us, are you?'

She shrugged.

'Do not do that,' said Fear Sengar behind them.

Surprised, she half turned. 'Why?'

The warrior looked uncomfortable with his own statement. He hesitated.

*What mystery is this?*

Udinaas laughed. 'His brother offered you a sword, Acquitor. Fear understands – it wasn't just expedience. Nor was your taking it, I'd wager—'

'You do not know that,' Seren said, suddenly uneasy. 'Trull spoke – he assured me it was nothing more—'

'Do you expect everyone to speak plainly?' the ex-slave asked. 'Do you expect *anyone* to speak plainly? What sort of world do you inhabit, Acquitor?' He laughed. 'Not the same as mine, that's for certain. For every word we speak, are there not a thousand left unsaid? Do we not often say one thing and mean the very opposite? Woman, look at us – look at yourself. Our souls might as well be trapped inside a haunted keep. Sure, we built it – each of us – with our own hands, but we've forgotten half the rooms, we get lost in the corridors. We stumble into rooms of raging heat, then stagger back, away, lest our own emotions roast us alive. Other places are cold as ice – as cold as this frozen land around us. Still others remain for ever dark – no lantern will work, every candle dies as if starved of air, and we grope around, collide with unseen furniture, with walls. We look out through the high windows, but distrust all that we see. We armour ourselves against unreal phantasms, yet shadows and whispers make us bleed.'

'Good thing the thousand words for each of those were left unsaid,' Fear Sengar muttered, 'else we find ourselves in the twilight of all existence before you are through.'

Udinaas replied without turning. 'I tore away the veil of your reason, Fear, for asking the Acquitor to stay. Do you deny that? You see her as betrothed to your brother. And that he happens to be dead means nothing, because, unlike your *youngest* brother, you are an honourable man.'

A grunt of surprise from Udinaas, as Fear Sengar reached out to grasp the ex-slave, hands closing on the wrapped folds of fur. A surge of anger sent Udinaas sprawling onto the muddy scree.

As the Tiste Edur then whirled to advance on the winded Letherii, Seren Pedac stepped into his path. 'Stop. Please, Fear. Yes, I know he deserved it. But . . . stop.'

Udinaas had managed to sit up, Kettle crouching down at his side and trying to wipe the smears of mud from his face. He coughed, then said, 'That will be the last time I compliment you, Fear.'

Seren turned on the ex-slave. 'That was a rather vicious compliment, Udinaas. And I second your own advice – don't say anything like that again. Ever. Not if you value your life—'

Udinaas spat grit and blood, then said, 'Ah, but now we've stumbled into a dark room indeed. And, Seren Pedac, you are not welcome there.' He pushed himself upright. 'You have been warned.' Then he looked up, one hand settling on Kettle's shoulder. His eyes, suddenly bright, avid, scanned Seren, Fear, and then moved up the trail, to where Silchas Ruin and Clip now stood side by side, regarding those downslope. 'Here's a most telling question – the kind few dare utter, by the way. Which one among us, friends, is *not* haunted by a death wish? Perhaps we ought to discuss mutual suicide . . .'

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats. Until Kettle said, 'I don't want to die!'

Seren saw the ex-slave's bitter smile crumble, a sudden collapse into undeniable grief, before he turned away.

'Trull was blind to his own truth,' Fear said to her in a quiet voice. 'I was there, Acquitor. I know what I saw.'

She refused to meet his eyes. *Expedience. How could such a warrior proclaim his love for me? How could he even believe he knew me enough for that?*

*And why can I see his face as clear in my mind as if he stood here before me? I am haunted indeed. Oh, Udinaas, you were right. Fear is an honourable man, so honourable as to break all our hearts.*

*But, Fear, there is no value in honouring one who is dead.*

'Trull is dead,' she said, stunning herself with her own brutality as she saw Fear visibly flinch. 'He is dead.' *And so am I. There is no point in honouring the dead. I have seen too much to believe otherwise. Grieve for lost potential, the end of possibilities, the eternally silent demise of promise. Grieve for that, Fear Sengar, and you will understand, finally, how grief is but a mirror, held close to one's own face.*

*And every tear springs from the choices we ourselves did not make.*

*When I grieve, Fear, I cannot even see the bloom of my own breath – what does that tell you?*

They resumed walking. Silent.

A hundred paces above the group, Clip spun his chain and rings. 'What was all that about?' he asked.

'You have lived in your tidy cave for too long,' the white-skinned Tiste Andii said.

'Oh, I get out often enough. Carousing in Bluerose – the gods know how many bastards have been brewed by my seed. Why—'

'One day, Mortal Sword,' Silchas Ruin interrupted, 'you will discover what cuts deeper than any weapon of iron.'

'Wise words from the one who smells still of barrows and rotting cobwebs.'

'If the dead could speak, Clip, what would they tell you?'

'Little, I expect, beyond complaints about this and that.'

'Perhaps, then, that is all you deserve.'

'Oh, I lack honour, do I?'

'I am not sure what you lack,' Silchas Ruin replied, 'but I am certain I will comprehend before we are done.'

Rings and chain snapped taut. 'Here they come. Shall we continue onward and upward?'

There was so much that Toc the Younger – Anaster, Firstborn of the Dead Seed, the Thrice-blinded, Chosen by the Wolf Gods, the Unlucky – did not wish to remember. His other body for one; the body he had been born into, the first home to his soul. Detonations against Moon's Spawn above the doomed city of Pale, fire and searing, blazing heat – *oh, don't stand there*. Then that damned puppet, Hairlock, delivering oblivion, wherein his soul had found a rider, another force – a wolf, one-eyed and grieving.

How the Pannion Seer had lusted for its death. Toc recalled the cage, that spiritual prison, and the torment as his body was broken, healed, then broken yet again, a procession seemingly without end. But these memories and pain and anguish persisted as little more than abstract notions. Yet, mangled and twisted as that body had been, *at least it was mine*.

Strip away years, course sudden in new blood, feel these strange limbs so vulnerable to cold. To awaken in another's flesh, to start against muscle memories, to struggle with those that were suddenly gone. Toc wondered if any other mortal soul had ever before staggered this tortured path. Stone and fire had marked him, as Tool once told him. To lose an eye delivers the gift of preternatural sight. And what of leaving a used-up body for a younger, healthier one? *Surely a gift – so the wolves desired, or was it Silverfox?*

*But wait. A closer look at this Anaster – who lost an eye, was given a new one, then lost it yet again. Whose mind – before it was broken and flung away – was twisted with terror, haunted by a mother's terrible love; who had lived the life of a tyrant among cannibals – oh yes, look closely at these limbs, the muscles beneath, and remember – this body has grown with the eating of human flesh. And this mouth, so eager with its words, it has tasted the succulent juices of its kin – remember that?*

No, he could not.

*But the body can. It knows hunger and desire on the battlefield – walking among the dead and dying, seeing the split flesh, the jutting bones, smelling the reek of spilled blood – ah, how the mouth waters.*

Well, everyone had his secrets. And few are worth sharing. *Unless you enjoy losing friends.*

He rode apart from the train, ostensibly taking an outrider flank, as he had done as a soldier, long ago. The Awl army of Redmask, fourteen thousand or so warriors, half again as many in the trailing support train – weaponsmiths, healers, horsewives, elders, old women, the lame and the once-born children, and, of course, twenty or so thousand rodara. Along with wagons, travois, and almost three thousand herd dogs and the larger wolf-hunters the Awl called dray. If anything could trigger cold fear in Toc it was these beasts. Too many by far, and rarely fed, they ranged in packs, running down every creature on the plains for leagues around.

*But let us not forget the K'Chain Che'Malle.* Living, breathing ones. Tool – or perhaps it was Lady Envy – had told him that they had been extinct for thousands of years – tens, hundreds of thousands, even. Their civilization was dust. *And wounds in the sky that never heal; now there's a detail worth remembering, Toc.* The huge creatures provided Redmask's bodyguard at the head of the vanguard – no risk of assassination, to be sure.

The male – Sag'Churok – was a K'ell Hunter, bred to kill, the elite guard of a Matron. *So where is the Matron? Where is his Queen?*

Perhaps it was the young female in the K'ell's company.

Gunth Mach. Toc had asked Redmask how he had come to know their names, but the war leader had refused him an answer. Reticent bastard. *A leader must have his secrets, perhaps more so than anyone else. But Redmask's secrets are driving me mad. K'Chain Che'Malle, for Hood's sake!* Outcast, the young warrior had journeyed into the eastern wastelands. So went the tale, although after that initial statement it was a tale that in truth went nowhere, since virtually nothing else was known of Redmask's adventures during those decades – *yet at some point, this man donned a red-scaled mask. And found himself flesh and blood K'Chain Che'Malle. Who did not chop him to pieces. Who somehow communicated to him their names. Then swore allegiance. What is it, then, about this story that I really do not like?*

*How about all of it.*

The eastern wastelands. A typical description for a place the name-givers found inhospitable or unconquerable. *We can't claim it so it is worthless, a wasted land, a wasteland. Hah, and you thought us without imaginations!*

Haunted by ghosts, or demons, the earth blasted, where every blade of grass clings to a neighbour in abject terror.

The sun's light is darker, its warmth colder. Shadows are smudged. Water brackish and quite possibly poisonous. Two-headed babies are common. Every tribe needed such a place. For heroic war leaders to wander into on some fraught quest rife with obscure motivations that could easily be bludgeoned into morality tales. *And, alas, this particular tale is far from done. The hero needs to return, to deliver his people. Or annihilate them.*

Toc had his memories, a whole battlefield's worth, and as the last man left standing he held few illusions of grandeur, either as witness or as player. *So this lone eye cannot help but look askance. Is it any wonder I've taken to poetry?*

The Grey Swords had been cut to pieces. Slaughtered. Oh, they'd yielded their lives in blood enough to pay the Hound's Toll, as the Gadrobi were wont to say. But what had their deaths meant? *Nothing. A waste.* Yet here he rode, in the company of his betrayers.

*Does Redmask offer redemption? He promises the defeat of the Letherii – but they were not our enemies, not until we agreed the contract. So, what is redeemed? The extinction of the Grey Swords? Oh, I need to twist and bend to bind those two together, and how am I doing thus far?*

*Badly. Not a whisper of righteousness – no crow croaks on my shoulder as we march to war.*

*Oh, Tool, I could use your friendship right now. A few terse words on futility to cheer me up.*

Twenty myrid had been killed, gutted and skinned but not hung to drain their blood. The cavities where their organs had been were stuffed solid with a local tuber that had been sweated on hot stones. The carcasses were

then wrapped in hides and loaded into a wagon that was kept apart from all the others in the train. *Redmask's plans for the battle to come. No more peculiar than all the others. The man has spent years thinking on this inevitable war. That makes me nervous.*

*Hey, Tool, you'd think after all I've been through, I'd have no nerves left. But I'm no Whiskeyjack. Or Kalam. No, for me, it just gets worse.*

*Marching to war. Again. Seems the world wants me to be a soldier.*

*Well, the world can go fuck itself.*

'A haunted man,' the elder said in his broken growl as he reached up and scratched the savage red scar marring his neck. 'He should not be with us. Fey in darkness, that one. He dreams of running with wolves.'

Redmask shrugged, wondering yet again what this old man wanted with him. An elder who did not fear the K'Chain Che'Malle, who was so bold as to guide his ancient horse between Redmask and Sag'Churok.

'You should have killed him.'

'I do not ask for your advice, Elder,' Redmask said. 'He is owed respite. We must redeem our people in his eyes.'

'Pointless,' the old man snapped. 'Kill him and we need redeem ourselves to no-one. Kill him and we are free.'

'One cannot flee the past.'

'Indeed? That belief must taste bitter for one such as you, Redmask. Best discard it.'

Redmask slowly faced the man. 'Of me, Elder, you know nothing.'

A twisted smile. 'Alas, I do. You do not recognize me, Redmask. You should.'

'You are Renfayar – my tribe. You share blood with Masarch.'

'Yes, but more than that. I am old. Do you understand? I am the oldest among our people, the last one left . . . who was there, who remembers.

Everything.' The smile broadened, revealing rotted teeth, a pointed red – almost purple – tongue. 'I know your secret, Redmask. I know what she meant to you, and *I know why*.' The eyes glittered, black and red-rimmed. 'You had best fear me, Redmask. You had best heed my words – my advice. I shall ride your shoulder, yes? From this moment on, until the very day of battle. And I shall speak with the voice of the Awl, my voice the voice of their souls. And know this, Redmask: I shall not countenance their betrayal. Not by you, not by that one-eyed stranger and his bloodthirsty wolves.'

Redmask studied the old man a moment longer, then fixed his gaze ahead once more.

A soft, ragged laugh at his side, then, 'You dare say nothing. You dare do nothing. I am a dagger hovering over your heart. Do not fear me – there is no need, unless you intend evil. I wish you great glory in this war. I wish the end of the Letherii, for all time. Perhaps such glory shall come by your hand – together, you and I, let us strive for that, yes?'

A long moment of silence.

'Speak, Redmask,' the elder growled. 'Lest I suspect defiance.'

'An end to the Letherii, yes,' Redmask finally said, in a grating voice. 'Victory for the Awl.'

'Good,' grunted the old man. 'Good.'

The magic world had ended abruptly, an ending as sudden as the slamming of a trunk lid – a sound that had always shocked her, frozen her in place. Back in the city, that place of reeks and noise, there had been a house steward, a tyrant, who would hunt down slave children who had, in his words, disappointed him. A night spent in the musty confines of the bronze box would teach them a thing or two, wouldn't it?

Stayandi had spent one such night, enclosed in cramped darkness, two months or so before the slaves joined the colonists out on the plain. The solid clunk of the lid had truly seemed, then, the end of the world. Her shrieks had filled the close air of the trunk until something broke in her throat, until every scream was naught but a hiss of air.

Since that time, she had been mute, yet this had proved a gift, for she had been selected to enter the Mistress's domain as a handmaiden in training. No secrets would pass her lips, after all. And she would have been there still, if not for the homesteading.

A magic world. So much space, so much air. The freedom of blue skies, unending wind and darkness lit by countless stars – she had not imagined such a world existed, all within reach.

And then one night, it ended. A fierce nightmare made real in screams of slaughter.

Abasard—

She had fled into the darkness, stunned with the knowledge of his death – her brother, who had flung himself into the demon's path, who had died in her place. Her bared feet, feather-light, carrying her away, the hiss of grasses soon the only sound to reach her ears. Stars glittering, the plain bathed silver, the wind cooling the sweat on her skin.

In her mind, her feet carried her across an entire continent. Away from the realm of people, of slaves and masters, of herds and soldiers and demons. She was alone now, witness to a succession of dawns, smeared sunsets, alone on a plain that stretched out unbroken on all sides. She saw wild creatures, always at a distance. Darting hares, antelope watching from ridgelines, hawks wheeling in the sky. At night she heard the howl of wolves and coyotes and, once, the guttural bellow of a bear.

She did not eat, and the pangs of hunger soon passed, so that she floated, and all that her eyes witnessed shone with a luminous clarity. Water she licked from dew-laden grasses, the cupped holes of deer and elk tracks in basins, and once she found a spring, almost hidden by thick brush in which flitted hundreds of tiny birds. It had been their chittering songs that had drawn her attention.

An eternity of running later, she had fallen. And found no strength to rise once more, to resume the wondrous journey through this glowing land.

Night then stole upon her, and not long after came the four-legged people. They wore furs smelling of wind and dust, and they gathered close, lying down, sharing the warmth of their thick, soft cloaks. There were children among them, tiny babes that crawled as did their parents, squirming and snuggling up against her.

And when they fed on milk, so did Stayandi.

The four-legged people were as mute as she was, until they began their mournful cries, when night was at its deepest; crying – she knew – to summon the sun.

They stayed with her, guardians with their gifts of warmth and food. After the milk, there was meat. Crushed, mangled carcasses – mice, shrews, a headless snake – she ate all they gave her, tiny bones crunching in her mouth, damp fur and chewy skin.

This too seemed timeless, a *foreverness*. The grown-ups came and went. The children grew burlier, and she now crawled with them when it was time to wander.

When the bear appeared and rushed towards them, she was not afraid. It wanted the children, that much was obvious, but the grown-ups attacked and drove it off. Her people were strong, fearless. They ruled this world.

Until one morning she awoke to find herself alone. Forcing herself to her hind legs, helpless whimpering coming from her throat in jolts of pain, she scanned the land in all directions—

And saw the giant. Bare above the waist, the deep hue of sun-darkened skin almost entirely obscured beneath white paint – paint that transformed his chest, shoulders and face into bone. His eyes, as he walked closer, were black pits in the caked mask skull. He carried weapons: a long spear, a sword with a broad, curved blade. The fur of the four-legged people was wrapped about his hips, and the small but deadly knives strung in a necklace about the warrior's neck, they too belonged to her people.

Frightened, angry, she bared her teeth at the stranger, even as she cowered in the fold of a small hummock – nowhere to run, knowing he could catch

her effortlessly. Knowing that yet another of her worlds had shattered. Fear was her bronze box, and she was trapped, unable to move.

He studied her for a time, cocking his head as she snapped and snarled. Then slowly crouched down until his eyes were level with her own.

And she fell silent.

Remembering . . . things.

They were not kind eyes, but they were – she knew – like her own. As was his hairless face beneath that deathly paint.

She had run away, she now recalled, until it seemed her fleeing mind had outstripped her flesh and bone, had darted out into something unknown and unknowable.

And this savage face, across from her, was slowly bringing her mind back. And she understood, now, who the four-legged people were, what they were. She remembered what it was to stand upright, to run with two legs instead of four. She remembered an encampment, the digging of cellar pits, the first of the sod-walled houses. She remembered her family – her brother – and the night the demons came to steal it all away.

After a time of mutual silent regard, he straightened, settled the weapons and gear about himself once more, then set out.

She hesitated, then rose.

And, at a distance, she followed.

He walked towards the rising sun.

Scratching at the scarred, gaping hole where one eye had been, Toc watched the children running back and forth as the first cookfires were lit. Elders hobbled about with iron pots and wrapped foodstuffs – they were wiry, weathered folk, but days of marching had dulled the fire in their eyes, and more than a few snapped at the young ones who passed too close.

He saw Redmask, trailed by Masarch and Natarkas and another bearing the red face-paint, appear near the area laid out for the war leader's yurt.

Seeing Toc, Redmask approached.

'Tell me, Toc Anaster, you flanked our march on the north this day – did you see tracks?'

'What sort do you mean?'

Redmask turned to Natarkas's companion. 'Torrent rode to the south. He made out a trail that followed an antelope track – a dozen men on foot—'

'Or more,' the one named Torrent said. 'They were skilled.'

'Not Letherii, then,' Toc guessed.

'Moccasined,' Redmask replied, his tone betraying slight irritation at Torrent's interruption. 'Tall, heavy.'

'I noted nothing like that,' said Toc. 'Although I admit I was mostly scanning horizon lines.'

'This place shall be our camp,' Redmask said after a moment. 'We will meet the Letherii three leagues from here, in the valley known as Bast Fulmar. Toc Anaster, will you stay with the elders and children or accompany us?'

'I have had my fill of fields of battle, Redmask. I said I'd found myself a soldier again, but even an army's train needs guards, and that is about all I am up to right now.' He shrugged. 'Maybe from now on.'

The eyes in that scaled mask held on Toc for a half-dozen heartbeats, then slowly turned away. 'Torrent, you too will stay here.'

The warrior stiffened in surprise. 'War Leader—'

'You will begin training those children who are close to their death nights. Bows, knives.'

Torrent bowed, stiffly. 'As you command.'

Redmask left them, trailed by Natarkas and Masarch.

Torrent glanced over at Toc. 'My courage is not broken,' he said.

'You're young still,' he replied.

'You will oversee the younger children, Toc Anaster. That and nothing more. You will keep them and yourself out of my way.'

Toc had had enough of this man. 'Torrent, you rode at your old war leader's side when you Awl abandoned us to the Letherii army. Be careful of your bold claims of courage. And when I came to you and pleaded for the lives of my soldiers, you turned away with the rest of them. I believe Redmask has just taken your measure, Torrent, and if I hear another threat from you I will give you reason to curse me – with what will be your last breath.'

The warrior bared his teeth in a humourless smile. 'All I see in that lone eye, Toc Anaster, tells me you are already cursed.' He pivoted and walked away.

*Well, the bastard has a point. So maybe I'm not as good at this give and take as I imagined myself to be. For these Awl, it is a way of life, after all. Then again, the Malazan armies are pretty good at it, too – no wonder I never really fit.*

A half-dozen children hurried past, trailed by a mud-smeared toddler struggling to keep up. Seeing the chattering mob vanish round a tent, the toddler halted, then let out a wail.

Toc grunted. *Aye, you and me both.* He made a rude sound and the toddler looked over, eyes wide. Then laughed.

Eye socket fiercely itching once more, Toc scratched for a moment, then headed over, issuing yet another rude noise. *Oh, look at that – innocent delight. Well, Toc, take your rewards where and when you can.*

Redmask stood at the very edge of the sprawling encampment, studying the horizon to the south. 'Someone is out there,' he said in a low voice.

'So it seems,' Natarkas said. 'Strangers – who walk our land as if they owned it. War Leader, you have wounded Torrent—'

'Torrent must learn the value of respect. And so he will, as weapon master to a score of restless adolescents. When next he joins us, he will be a wiser man. Do you challenge my decisions, Natarkas?'

'Challenge? No, War Leader. But at times I will probe them, if I find the need to understand them better.'

Redmask nodded, then said to the warrior standing a short distance away, 'Heed those words, Masarch.'

'So I shall,' the young warrior replied.

'Tomorrow,' said Redmask, 'I lead my warriors to war. Bast Fulmar.'

Natarkas hissed, then said, 'A cursed valley.'

'We will honour the blood spilled there three hundred years ago, Natarkas. The past will die there, and from there on we shall look only to a new future. New in every way.'

'This new way of fighting, War Leader, I see little honour in it.'

'You speak true. There is none to be found. Such is necessity.'

'Must necessity be surrender?'

Redmask looked across at the warrior whose face was painted in the likeness of his own mask. 'When the ways surrendered hold naught but the promise of failure, then yes. It must be done. They must be cast away.'

'The elders will find that difficult to accept, War Leader.'

'I know. You and I have played this game before. This is not their war. It is mine. And I mean to win it.'

They were silent then, as the wind, a dirge through dead grasses, moaned ghostly across the land.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sea without water
spreads white bones
crumbled flat and bleached
like parchment
where I walked.

But this scrawl
scratching my wake
is without history
bereft of raiment
to clothe my fate.

Sky has lost its clouds
to some ragged wind
that never runs aground
these shoals revealed
on paths untrod.

Wind heaves waves
unseen in the shell
a cup of promise unfulfilled
the rank lie of salt
that bites my tongue.

I dwelt by a sea, once
etching histories
along the endless strand
in rolling scrolls
of flotsam and weed.

*Rumours of the Sea*
Fisher kel Tath

There had been rain in the afternoon, which was just as well since there wasn't much value in burning the entire forest down and besides, he wasn't popular at the best of times. They had mocked his antics, and they had said he stank, too, so much so that no-one ever came within reach of his huge, gnarled hands. Of course, had any of his neighbours done so, he might well have torn their limbs off to answer years of scorn and abuse.

Old Hunch Arbat no longer pulled his cart from farm to farm, from shack to shack, collecting the excrement with which he buried the idols of the Tarthenal gods that had commanded a mostly forgotten glade deep in the woods. The need had passed, after all. The damned hoary nightmares were dead.

His neighbours had not appreciated Arbat's sudden retirement, since now the stink of their wastes had begun to foul their own homes. Lazy wastrels that they were, they weren't of a mind to deepen their cesspits – didn't Old Hunch empty them out on a regular basis? Well, not any more.

That alone might have been reason enough to light out. And Arbat would have liked nothing better than to just vanish into the forest gloom, never to be seen again. Walk far, yes, until he came to a hamlet or village where none knew him, where none even knew of him. Rainwashed of all odour, just some kindly, harmless old mixed-blood Tarthenal who could, for a coin or two, mend broken things, including flesh and bone.

Walk, then. Leaving behind the old Tarthenal territories, away from the weed-snagged statues in the overgrown glades. And maybe, even, away from the ancient blood of his heritage. Not all healers were shamans, were they? They'd not ask any awkward questions, so long as he treated them right, and he could do that, easy.

Old bastards like him deserved their rest. A lifetime of service. Propitiations, the Masks of Dreaming, the leering faces of stone, the solitary rituals – all done, now. He could walk his last walk, into the unknown. A hamlet, a village, a sun-warmed boulder beside a trickling stream, where he could settle back and ease his tortured frame and not move, until the final mask was pulled away . . .

Instead, he had woken in darkness, in the moments before false dawn, shaking as if afflicted with ague, and before his eyes had hovered the slowly shredding fragments of a most unexpected Dream Mask. One he had never seen before, yet a visage of terrifying power. A mask crazed with cracks, a mask moments from shattering explosively—

Lying on his cot, the wood frame creaking beneath him as he trembled from head to foot, he waited for revelation.

The sun was high overhead when he finally emerged from his shack. Banks of clouds climbed the sky to the west – an almost-spent storm coming in from the sea – and he set about his preparations, ignoring the rain when it arrived.

Now, with dusk fast approaching, Arbat collected a bundled cane of rushes and set one end aflame from the hearth. He fired his shack, then the woodshed, and finally the old barn wherein resided his two-wheeled cart. Then, satisfied that each building was truly alight, he shouldered the sack containing those possessions and supplies he would need, and set out onto the trail leading down to the road.

A grunt of surprise a short time later, on the road, as he ran into a score of villagers hurrying in a mob towards him. In their lead, the Factor, who cried out in relief upon seeing Arbat.

'Thank the Errant you're alive, Hunch!'

Scowling, Arbat studied the man's horsey face for a moment, then scanned the pale smudges of the other faces, hovering behind the Factor. 'What is all this?' he demanded.

'A troop of Edur are staying at the inn tonight, Arbat. When word of the fires reached them they insisted we head up to help – in case the wood goes up, you see—'

'The wood, right. So where are the meddlers now, then?'

'They remained behind, of course. But I was ordered—' the Factor paused, then leaned closer to peer up at Arbat. 'Was it Vrager, then? The fool likes his fires, and is no friend of yours.'

'Vrager? Could be. He's been in the habit of sneaking in at night and pissing on my door. Doesn't accept me being retired and all. Says I got a duty to cart away his shit.'

'And so you do!' someone growled from the mob behind the Factor. 'Why else do we let you live here anyway?'

'Well that's a problem solved now, ain't it?' Arbat said, grinning. 'Vrager burned me out, so I'm leaving.' He hesitated, then asked, 'What business was this of the Edur? It's just done rained – the chances of the blaze moving much ain't worth the worry. Didn't you tell them my place is cleared back eighty, a hundred paces on all sides? And there's the old settling pools – good as a moat.'

The Factor shrugged, then said, 'They asked about you, then decided maybe someone had torched you out of spite – and that's breaking the law and the Edur don't like it when that happens—'

'And they told you to do your job, did they?' Arbat laughed at the man. 'That'd be a first!'

'Vrager, you said – is that a formal accusation, Arbat? If it is, you gotta dictate and make your mark and stay round for the convening and if Vrager hires an advocate—'

'Vrager's got a cousin in Letheras who's just that,' someone said.

The Factor nodded. 'All this could take a damned while, Arbat, and ain't none of us obliged to give you a roof overhead, neither—'

'So best I don't cause trouble, right? You can tell the Edur I wasn't making no formal complaint, so that's that. And what with the shacks pretty much burnt down by now and the chill seeping into your bones and no sign the fire's jumped anywhere . . .' Arbat slapped the Factor on the shoulder – a gesture that nearly drove the man to his knees – then stepped past. 'Make way, the rest of you – could be I'm still contagious with all the sick you been dumping in my cart.'

That worked readily enough, and Arbat's way was suddenly clear. And on he walked.

They'd give Vrager some trouble – not good calling down the Edur's regard, after all – but it'd be nothing fatal. Pissing against a door don't forfeit the fool's life, now did it? Anyway, the Edur would ride on, to wherever it was they were going, and he'd leave them—

What now? Horses on the road, riders coming at the canter. Grumbling under his breath, Old Hunch Arbat worked his way to one verge, then waited.

Another damned troop. Letherii this time.

The lead rider, an officer, slowed her mount upon seeing Arbat, and the troop behind her did the same at her command. As she trotted her horse closer, she called out, 'You, sir – is there a village ahead?'

'There is,' Arbat replied, 'though you might have to fight for room at the inn.'

'And why's that?' she asked as she rode opposite.

'Some Edur staying the night there.'

At that the officer reined in, gesturing the rest to a halt. Twisting in her saddle, she eyed him from beneath the ridge of her iron helm. 'Tiste Edur?'

'That's them all right.'

'What are they doing there?'

Before he could answer, one of her soldiers said, 'Atri-Preda, something's blazing ahead – y'can see the glow and smell it.'

'That'd be my homestead,' Arbat replied. 'Accident. It won't spread, I'm sure of that as can be. Got nothing to do,' he added, 'with them Edur. They're just passing through.'

The Atri-Preda swore under her breath. 'Tarthenal, yes?'

'Mostly.'

'Can you think of anywhere we can camp for the night, then? Close by, but well off the trail.'

Arbat squinted at her. 'Off the trail, eh? Far enough off so's your privacy ain't disturbed, you mean?'

She nodded.

Arbat rubbed at the bristly hair covering his prognathous jaw. 'Forty or so paces up there's a trail, right side of the road. Leads through a thicket, then an old orchard, and beyond that there's an abandoned homestead – barn's still got a roof, though I doubt it's weatherproof. There's a well too, which should be serviceable enough.'

'This close by, and no-one's occupied it or stripped it down?'

Arbat grinned. 'Oh, they'll get to that before long. It was downwind of my place, you see.'

'No, I don't.'

His grin broadened into a smile. 'Local colour kinda pales when told to outsiders. It's no matter, really. All you'll be smelling is woodsmoke this night, and that'll keep the bugs away.'

He watched as she thought about pressing the matter; then, as her horse tossed its head, she gathered the reins once more. 'Thank you, Tarthenal. Be safe in your journey.'

'And you, Atri-Preda.'

They rode on, and Arbat waited on the verge for the troop to pass.

*Safe in my journey. Yes, safe enough, I suppose. Nothing on the road I can't handle.*

*No, it's the destination that's got my knees knocking together like two skulls in a sack.*

Lying on his stomach, edging up to the trapdoor, peering down. A menagerie in the room below, yet comforting in its odd domesticity nonetheless. Why, he knew artists who would pay for such a scene. Ten hens wandering about, occasionally squawking from the path of a clumsily swung foot from Ublala Pung as the huge man paced back and forth. The

scholar Janath sitting with her back to one wall, rolling chicken down or whatever it was called between the palms of her hands, prior to stuffing it into a burlap sack that was intended to serve as a pillow at some point – proving beyond all doubt that academics knew nothing about anything worth knowing about. Not to mention inserting a sliver of fear that Bugg's healing of her mind had not been quite up to scratch. And finally, Bugg himself, crouched by the hearth, using a clawed hen foot to stir the steaming pot of chicken soup, a detail which, Tehol admitted, had a certain macabre undercurrent. As did the toneless humming coming from his stalwart manservant.

True enough, the household was blessed with food aplenty, marking the continuation of their good run of luck. Huge capabara fish beside the canal a couple of weeks back, and now retired hens being retired one by one, as inexorable as the growl of a stomach. Or two or three. Or four, assuming Ublala Pung had but one stomach which was not in any way certain. Selush might know, having dressed enough bodies from the inside out. Tarthenal had more organs in those enormous bodies than regular folk, after all. Alas, this trait did not extend to brains.

Yet another formless, ineffable worry was afflicting Ublala Pung. Could be lovestruck again, or struck to fear by love. The half-blood lived in a world of worry, which, all things considered, was rather surprising. Then again, that undeniable virtue between his legs garnered its share of worshippers, lighting feminine eyes with the gleam of possession, avarice, malicious competition – in short, all those traits most common to priesthoods. But it was worship for all the wrong reasons, as poor Ublala's fretful state of mind made plain. His paltry brain wanted to be loved for itself.

Making him, alas, a complete idiot.

'Ublala,' Bugg said from where he hovered over the soup pot, 'glance upward for me if you will to confirm that those beady eyes studying us belong to my master. If so, please be so kind as to invite him down for supper.'

Tall as he was, Ublala's face, lifting into view to squint upwards at Tehol, was within reach. Smiling and patting him on the head, Tehol said, 'My friend, if you could, step back from what serves as a ladder here – and given my manservant's lacklustre efforts at repair I am using the description advisedly – so that I may descend in a manner befitting my station.'

'What?'

'Get out of the way, you oaf !'

Ducking, edging away, Ublala grunted. 'Why is he so miserable?' he asked, jerking a thumb up at Tehol. 'The world is about to end but does he care about that? No. He doesn't. Care about that. The world ending. Does he?'

Tehol shifted round to lead with his feet on the uppermost rung of the ladder. 'Loquacious Ublala Pung, how ever will we follow the track of your thoughts? I despair.' He wiggled over the edge then groped with his feet.

Bugg spoke. 'Given the view you are presently providing us, master, despair is indeed the word. Best look away, Janath.'

'Too late,' she replied. 'To my horror.'

'I live in the company of voyeurs!' Tehol managed to find the rung with one foot and began making his way down.

'I thought they were chickens,' Ublala said.

A piercing avian cry, ending in a mangled crunch.

'Oh.'

Cursing from Bugg. 'Damn you, Pung! You're eating that one! All by yourself! And you can cook it yourself, too!'

'It just got in the way! If you built some more rooms, Bugg, it wouldn't have happened.'

'And if you did your damned pacing in the alley outside – better yet, if you just stopped worrying about things – or bringing those worries here – or always showing up around supper time – or—'

'Now now,' Tehol interjected, stepping free of the last rung and adjusting his blanket. 'Nerves are frayed and quarters are cramped and Ublala's cramped brain is fraying our nerves without quarter, so it would be best if we all—'

'Master, he just flattened a hen!'

'A voyeur,' Ublala insisted.

'—got along,' Tehol finished.

'Time, I think,' said Janath, 'for some mitigation, Tehol. I seem to recall you having some talent for that, especially working your way around the many attempts at expelling you.'

'Yeah,' said Ublala, 'where do we do that?'

'Do what?' Janath asked.

'I gotta go.'

'Over to the warehouse,' Tehol said, pushing Ublala towards the door – without much success. 'Ublala, do your expelling back of the warehouse, near the drain spout. Use the comfrey bush poking out of the rubbish heap then wash your hands in the tilted trough.'

Looking relieved, the huge man ducked his way out into the alley.

Turning, Tehol regarded Bugg. 'All right, a moment of silence, then, for the retired hen.'

Rubbing his brow, Bugg leaned back and sighed. 'Sorry. I'm not used to these . . . crowds.'

'What amazes me,' Tehol said, now studying the surviving hens, 'is their eerie indifference. They just walk around their crushed sister—'

'Wait a moment and they'll start ripping it apart,' Bugg said, shambling over to collect the carcass. 'Between the two, I prefer indifference.' He picked the limp form up, frowned at the dangling neck. 'Quiet in death, as with all things. Almost all things, I mean . . .' Abruptly he shook his head

and tossed the dead creature onto the floor in front of Janath. 'More feathers for you, Scholar.'

'A most appropriate task,' Tehol murmured, 'plucking lovely plumage to reveal the pimpled nightmare beneath.'

'Sort of like inadvertently looking up your tunic, Tehol Beddict.'

'You are a cruel woman.'

She paused and looked up at him. 'Assuming those were just pimples.'

'Most cruel, leading me to suspect that you in fact fancy me.'

Janath shot Bugg a glance. 'What kind of healing did you do on me, Bugg? My world seems . . . smaller.' She tapped one temple. 'In here. My thoughts travel any distance – any distance at all – and they vanish in a . . . in a white nothing. Blissful oblivion. So, I do remember what happened, but not even a whisper of emotion reaches me.'

'Janath, most of those protections are of your own making. Things will . . . expand. But it will take time. In any case, it is not too surprising that you are developing an attachment to Tehol, seeing him as your protector—'

'Now hold on, old man! Attachment? To Tehol? To an ex-student? That is, in every way imaginable, disgusting.'

'I thought it was a common occurrence,' Tehol said. 'Why, some of the stories I've heard—'

'Common for those fools who confuse love with worship – all to feed their paltry egos, I might add. Usually men, too. Married men. It's pathetic —'

'Janath, did— No, never mind.' Rubbing his hands together, Tehol faced Bugg. 'My, that soup smells wonderful.'

Ublala Pung returned, shouldering his way through the doorway. 'That comfrey tasted awful,' he said.

The three stared at him for a long moment.

Then Bugg spoke. 'See those half-gourds, Ublala? Bring them over and get your voyeur soup.'

'I could eat a whole one all by myself, I'm so hungry.'

Tehol pointed. 'There's one right there, Ublala.'

The huge man paused, glanced over at the bedraggled carcass. Then pushed the gourds into Tehol's hands and said, 'Okay.'

'Leave me some feathers?' Janath asked.

'Okay.'

Tehol said, 'Do you mind, Ublala, if the rest of us eat . . .

uh, up on the roof?'

'Go ahead.'

'After supper,' Tehol continued as the half-blood lowered himself into a cross-legged position, reached for the carcass and tore off a leg. 'After, I mean, Ublala, we can talk about what's worrying you, all right?'

'No point talking,' Ublala said around a mouthful of feathers, skin and meat. 'I got to take you to him.'

'Who?'

'A champion. The Toblakai.'

Tehol met Bugg's eyes, and saw in them unfeigned alarm.

'We got to break into the compound,' Ublala continued.

'Uh, right.'

'Then make sure he doesn't kill us.'

'I thought you said there was no point in talking!'

'I did. There isn't.'

Janath collected her gourd of soup. 'So we have to climb one-handed up that ladder? And I expect you want me to go first? Do you think me an

idiot?'

Tehol scowled at her, then brightened. 'You have a choice, Janath. You follow me and Bugg, at the risk of your appetite, or we follow you, lifting you skyward with our sighs of admiration.'

'How about neither?' With that, she headed out into the alley.

Horrible crunching sounds came from where Ublala sat. After a moment, both Tehol and Bugg followed in Janath's wake.

Ormly, once Champion Rat Catcher, sat down opposite Rucket.

After a nod of greeting, she returned to her meal. 'I'd offer you some of these crisped hog ears, but as you can see, there's not many left and they are one of my favourites.'

'You do it on purpose, don't you?'

'Men always assume beautiful women think of nothing but sex, or, rather, are obsessed with the potential thereof, at any and every moment. But I assure you, food poses a sensuality rarely achieved in clumsy gropings on some flea-bitten mattress with errant draughts sending chills through you at every change of position.'

Ormly's withered face twisted into a scowl. 'Change of position? What does that mean?'

'Something tells me there is no legion of beleaguered women bemoaning the loss of one Ormly.'

'I wouldn't know nothing about that. Listen, I'm nervous.'

'How do you think I feel? Care for some wine? Oh, I was hoping you'd decline. You know, hiding in this burial crypt has put a strain on select vintages. It's all very well for you, skulking in the shadows every night, but as the new commander of our insurgent organization, I have to hide down here, receiving and despatching all day, doing endless paperwork—'

'What paperwork?'

'Well, the paperwork I do to convince the minions how busy I am, so they don't come running to me every damned moment.'

'Yes, but what are you writing down, Rucket?'

'I record snatches of overheard conversations – the acoustics down here are impressive if a tad wayward. One can achieve sheer poetry on occasion, with judicial use of juxtaposition.'

'If it's random then it ain't poetry,' Ormly said, still scowling.

'Clearly you don't keep up with modern movements, then.'

'Just one, Rucket, and that's what I'm nervous about. It's Tehol Beddict, you see.'

'A most extraordinary juxtaposition there,' she replied, reaching for another hog's ear. 'Idiocy and genius. In particular, his genius for creating idiotic moments. Why, the last time we made love—'

'Rucket, please! Don't you see what's going on out there? Oh, sorry, I guess you don't. But listen to me, then. He's *too* successful! It's going too fast! The Patriotists are stirred up something awful, and you can be sure the Liberty Consign is backing them with every resource at its disposal. In the Low Markets they're starting to barter because there's no coin.'

'Well, that was the plan—'

'But we're not ready!'

'Ormly, Scale House collapsed, didn't it?'

He glared at her suspiciously, then grunted and looked away. 'All right, so we knew that was coming. We've been ready for that, yes. True enough. Even though we're no closer to knowing what'll happen when whatever it is happens, assuming we'll even know it's happening when it does. Anyway, you're just trying to confuse me, because you've lost all objectivity when it comes to Tehol.'

'Oh now really, do you take me for a fool?'

'Yes. Love, lust, whatever, it's affected your ability to think straight when it comes to that madman.'

'You're the one not thinking straight. Tehol's not the mystery here. Tehol's easy – no, not that kind of – oh, very well, that kind, too. Anyway, like I said. Easy. The true mystery before us, Ormly, is his damned manservant.'

'Bugg?'

'Bugg.'

'But he's just the front man—'

'You sure it's not the other way round? What does he do with all that coin they've leveraged into their hands? Bury it in the back yard? They don't even have a back yard. Ormly, we're talking tons of coinage here.' She waved a hand about. 'Could fill this crypt twenty times over. Now, sure, there're other crypts under the city, but we know them all. I've sent runners to every one of them, but they're empty, the dust underfoot not disturbed in years. We've sent rats into every fissure, every crevasse, every crack. Nothing.' She snapped her fingers. 'Gone. As if into thin air. And not just in this city, either.'

'So maybe Tehol's found a hiding place we ain't looked at yet. Something both clever and idiotic, like you said.'

'I thought of that, Ormly. Trust me when I tell you, it's all gone.'

His scowl suddenly cleared and he reached for a refill of the wine. 'I figured it out. It's all dumped into the river. Simple. Easy.'

'Except that Tehol insists it can be recovered – to flood the market, if the Consign financiers panic and start minting more than the usual quota. And even that quota is proving inflationary, since there's no recycling of old coins taking place. There's no return for recasting. I hear even the Imperial Treasury is hurting. Tehol says he can dump it all back onto the streets, at a moment's notice.'

'Maybe he's lying.'

'Maybe he isn't.'

'Maybe I'll have that last hog ear.'

'Forget it.'

'Fine. We got another problem. Tensions are high between the Edur and the Patriotists – and the Chancellor and his army of thugs and spies. Blood was spilled.'

'Not surprising,' Rucket replied. 'It was bound to happen. And don't think the financial strain has nothing to do with it.'

'If it does it's only indirectly,' Ormly said. 'No, this clash was, I think, personal.'

'Can we make use of it?'

'Ah, finally we can discuss something and actually get somewhere.'

'You're just jealous of Tehol Beddict.'

'So what if I am. Forget it. Let's make plans.'

Sighing, Rucket gestured to one of her servants. 'Bring us another bottle, Unn.'

Ormly's brow lifted, and, as the huge man shambled off into a side chamber, he leaned closer. 'Unn? The one who . . .?'

'Murdered Gerun Eberict? Indeed, the very man. With his own two hands, Ormly. His own two hands.' Then she smiled. 'And those hands, well, murdering isn't the only thing they're good at.'

'I knew it! It *is* all you ever think about!'

She settled back in her chair. *Make them feel clever. The only sure way to keep the peace.*

Beneath the city of Letheras was a massive core of ice. A fist of Omtose Phellack, clutching in its implacable grip an ancient spirit. Lured, then trapped by a startling alliance of Ceda Kuru Qan, a Jaghut sorceress and an Elder God. For the Errant, it was a struggle to appreciate that conjoining, no matter how advantageous the consequence. A spirit imprisoned, until such

time as that hoary ritual weakened – or, more likely, was shattered in wilful malice. So, though temporary – and what truly wasn't? – it had prevented death and destruction on a colossal scale. All very well.

Kuru Qan treating with a Jaghut sorceress – surprising but not disturbing. No, it was Mael's involvement that gnawed ceaselessly in the Errant's thoughts.

*An Elder God. But not K'rul, not Draconus, not Kilmandaros. No, this was the one Elder God who never got involved. Mael's curse was everyone else's blessing. So what changed? What forced the old bastard's hand, enough so that he forged alliances, that he unleashed his power in the streets of the city, that he emerged onto a remote island and battered a broken god senseless?*

Friendship towards a pathetic mortal?

*And what, dear Mael, do you now plan to do about all those worshippers? The ones so abusing your indifference? They are legion and their hands drip blood in your name. Does this please you? From them, after all, you acquire power. Enough to drown this entire realm.*

War among the gods, but was the battle line so simply drawn as it seemed? The Errant was no longer sure.

He stood in solid rock, within reach of the enormous knot of ice. He could smell it, that gelid ancient sorcery that belonged to another era. The spirit imprisoned within it, frozen in the act of rising through a fetid lake, was a seething storm of helpless rage, blurred and indistinct at its centre. One of Mael's own kin, the Errant suspected, like a piece torn free only to suffer a geas of the Crippled God. Entirely unaware – so far – of the terrible fissures spread like crazed webs through that ice, fissures even now working their way inwards.

*Shattered indeed. With intent? No, not this time, but in imagining a place of permanence they chose in error. And no, they could not have known. This . . . nudge . . . not mine. Just . . . dread circumstance.*

*Does Mael know? Abyss take me, I need to speak to him – ah, how I recoil at the notion! How much longer can I delay? What rotted commodity would my silence purchase? What meagre reward my warning?*

Perhaps another word with that war god, Fener. But no, that poor creature probably knew even less than he did. Cowering, virtually usurped . . . *usurped, now there's an interesting notion. Gods at war . . . yes, possibly*.

The Errant withdrew, passing ghostly through rock. Sudden desire, impatience, pushed him onward. He would need a mortal's hand for what he planned. A mortal's blood.

He emerged onto a floor of mouldy, uneven pavestones. How far had he travelled? How much time had passed? Darkness and the muted sound of dripping water. He sniffed the air, caught the scent of life. Tainted acrid by delving into old magic. And knew where he was. Not far, then. Not long. *Never hide in the same place, child.* Mouth dry – something like anticipation – he hurried down the crooked corridor.

*I can do nothing, weak as I am. Edging askew the course of fates – I was once far more. Master of the Tiles. All that power in those scribed images, the near-words from a time when no written words existed. They would have starved without my blessing. Withered. Does this mean nothing? Am I past bargaining?*

He could feel now, within him, flaring to life, a once-dull ember of . . . of . . . *of what? Ah, yes, I see it clear. I see it.*

*Ambition.*

The Errant reached the secret chamber, could discern trickling heat at the entrance.

Crouched over a brazier, she spun round when he stepped into the room. The heady, damp air, thick with spices, made him feel half drunk. He saw her eyes widen.

'Turudal Brizad—'

The Errant staggered forward. 'It's this, you see. A bargain—'

He saw her hand edge out, hovering over the coals of the brazier. 'They all want to bargain. With me—'

'The Holds, witch. They clash, clumsy as crones. Against the young ones – the *Warrens*. Only a fool would call it a dance of equals. Power was robust, once. Now it is . . .' he smiled, taking another step closer, '*gracile*. Do you understand? What I offer you, witch?'

She was scowling to hide her fear. 'No. You stink like a refuse pit, Consort – you are not welcome here—'

'The tiles so want to play, don't they? Yet they clatter down in broken patterns, ever broken. There is no *flow*. They are outmoded, witch. *Outmoded*.'

A gesture with the hovering hand, and Feather Witch's eyes flicked past the Errant.

A faint voice behind him. '*Do not do this.*'

The Errant turned. 'Kuru Qan. She summoned *you*?' He laughed. 'I could banish you with the blink of an eye, ghost.'

'*She was not to know that. Heed my warning, Errant; you are driven to desperation. And the illusion of glory – do you not understand what has so afflicted you? You stood too close to the ice. Assailed by a storm of desire from the trapped demon. Its ambition. Its lust.*'

A sliver of doubt, stinging, then the Errant shook his head. 'I am the Master of the Tiles, Elder. No pathetic wellspring spirit could so infect me. My thoughts are clear. My purpose—' He turned again, dismissing the ghost behind him. And reeled slightly, needing a step to right himself.

The ghost of the Ceda spoke. '*Errant, you think to challenge the Warrens? Do you not realize that, as the Tiles once had a Master, so too the Warrens?*'

'Don't be a fool,' the Errant said. 'There are no tiles describing these warrens—'

'*Not Tiles. Cards. A Deck. And yes, there is a Master. Do you now choose to set yourself against him? To achieve what?*'

The Errant made no reply, although his answer whispered in his skull. *Usurpation. As a child before one such as myself. I might even pity him, as I wrest from him all power, every drop of blood, his very life.*

*I shall retreat from this world no longer.*

Kuru Qan continued, '*If you set the Holds to battle against the Warrens, Errant, you will shatter alliances—*'

The Errant snorted. 'They are already shattered, Ceda. What began as yet another march on the Crippled God to exact brutal punishment – as if the Fallen One commits a crime by virtue of his very existence – well, it is that no more. The Elders are awakened, awakened to themselves – the memory of what they once were, what they could be again. Besides,' he added as he took another step towards the now trembling Letherii witch, 'the enemy is divided, confused—'

'*All strangers to you. To us. Are you so certain that what you sense is true? Not simply what your enemy wants you to believe?*'

'Now you play games, Kuru Qan. Ever your flaw.'

'*This is not our war, Errant.*'

'Oh, but it is. My war. Rhulad's war. The Crippled God's. After all, it is not the Elder Gods who so hunger to destroy the Fallen One.'

'*They would if they but understood, Errant. But they are blinded by the lure of resurrection – as blinded as you, here, now. All but one, and that is the maker of the Warrens. K'rul himself. Errant, listen to me! To set the Holds against the Warrens, you declare war upon K'rul—*'

'No. Just his children. Children who will kill him if they can. They don't want him. He was gone, but now he walks the realms again, and drags with him the Tiles, the Holds, the ancient places he knew so well – there is the real war, Ceda!'

'*True, and K'rul's idiotic nostalgia is proving a most virulent poison – although he is yet to realize that. I am dead, Errant – the paths I have wandered—*'

'Do not interest me.'

'*Do not do this. This is all the Crippled God's game!* '

Smiling, the Errant reached out, the motion a blur. Grasped the Letherii witch round the throat. Lifted her clear of the floor.

In his other hand, a knife appeared.

*Blood. Mortal's gift to the Elder—*

She held something in one hand. Thrashing, struggling against his life-stealing grip, her eyes bulging, face darkening, she lashed out with that hand.

And stabbed a severed finger into his left eye.

The Errant bellowed in shock, a spear of incandescence lancing into his brain.

His knife bit into the woman's body. He flung her away, then lurched, flailing at his own face – where blood streamed down, where something dangled at the end of a thread against his cheek. *Got her, never mind what she did to me – got her, that foul creature – her blood – my blood – Abyss take me, the* pain!

Then she was back. Clawed hands gouging against his face – grasping something, tearing it away – *pain*! And her vicious snarl, close – '*I'm collecting*.' Twisting away, even as he slashed again with the knife, cutting into flesh, the edge rippling along bones.

She had torn away an eye. Gone. Crushed in one bloody hand.

But her blood gleamed on his knife. Enough. More than enough.

The Errant, one hand outstretched, lone eye struggling to make sense of a battered, broken perspective, staggered towards the doorway.

*All I need.*

Trailing blood, Feather Witch dragged herself to the far wall, where she curled up, in one stained hand the eye of a god, in the other the severed

finger of Brys Beddict – it felt swollen now, as if it absorbed the Errant's blood. Warm, no, *hot*.

'*Collecting*,' she whispered.

The ghost of the Ceda drew close. '*You are dying, child. You need a healer*.'

She spat. 'Then find me one.'

The brazier's coals pulsed, but all she could feel was cold, deep in her body, spreading outward to steal all life from her limbs.

'Hurry,' she said in a mumble.

But no-one replied.

The Errant stumbled down the bridge. To either side, the tiles of the Cedance spun in confused mayhem. He barked out a laugh, holding the slick knife before him as if it was a torch – he could feel the heat searing his face, drying the blood and other fluids weeping down from his left socket.

Someone had been here. Not long past.

Hannan Mosag. Delving the mysteries of ancient power.

But he was Tiste Edur. A stranger to these forces.

*No, they are mine. They were always mine. And now I come.*

*To reclaim them.*

*And I challenge you, Master of the Deck, whoever, whatever you are. Face me here, if you've the courage. I challenge you!*

The Errant reached the centre dais, held the knife high, then flung it down onto the tiles.

The point sank deep into painted stone.

He stared down. One eye. Widening.

The knife had pierced the centre of a tile, nailing it in place. The others now began swirling round it, as if drawn into a vortex.

The centre of a tile.

His own. The blade buried in the chest of the image. *My chest. What does that mean? No matter. What other tile could it possibly choose?*

The world trembled – he could feel it, deep in its core, spreading in ripples, those ripples rising, devouring energy, lifting into waves. The waves heaving higher, gaining speed, lifting . . .

The Errant laughed as power burgeoned within him. 'Mortal blood!'

Was she dead now? He'd struck her twice. Driven the weapon deep. She would have spilled out by now. A corpse huddled in that cursed chamber. Until the rats found her. And this was well. She could not be allowed to survive – he wanted no High Priestess, no mortal bound to his resurrected godhood. *The other prayers I can swallow. Ignore. They all know I never answer. Never give a thing away. Expecting nothing, so they receive nothing, and I am not bound to them.*

*But a High Priestess . . .*

He would have to make sure. Go back. And make sure.

The Errant spun round, began walking.

'Bastard,' Feather Witch said, her mouth filled with the taste of blood. Running from her nostrils, bubbling at the back of her throat. Immense pressures crushing her chest on the right side.

She could wait no longer. The ghost was too late.

'I am dying.'

*No. Errant, bastard god, forgotten god, hungry god.*

*Well, you are not the only hungry one around here.*

She bared her teeth in a red smile, then pushed the mangled eyeball into her mouth.

And swallowed.

The Errant staggered, rebounded from a corridor wall, as something reached into his chest and tore free a welter of power. Stole it away. Leaving a cavern of agony.

'The bitch!'

The roar echoed against cold stone.

And he heard her voice, filling his skull: *'I am yours now. You are mine. Worshipper and worshipped, locked together in mutual hate. Oh, won't that twist things, yes?*

*'You should have found someone else, Errant. I have read the histories. Destrai Anant, God Chosen, the Well of the Spirit. Feather Witch. You are mine. I am yours. And listen to my prayer – listen! Your Destrai demands it! In my hand, now, waits our Mortal Sword. He too has tasted your blood. Your power can heal him as it has done me. Do you not still feel his'* – malicious delight – *'touch?'*

Her laughter rasped in his head, rebounding bitter with his stolen power.

*'Summon him, Errant. We need him.'*

'No.'

*'We need him! And a Shield Anvil – a T'orrud Segul in the language of the First Empire. Which of us shall choose? Oh, of course, you would claim that right for yourself. But I have a candidate. Another wrapped tight in webs of spite – I utter his name and so find a face to my deepest hatred – is that not well suited?*

*'And yes, he still lives. Udinaas. Let us make of this priesthood a company of betrayers. Let us claim the Empty Throne – it was ever rightfully ours, Errant – beloved.*

*'Udinaas. Claim him! Choose him! We can devour each other's souls across the span of a thousand years. Ten thousand!'*

'Leave me, damn you!'

*'Leave you? God of mine, I compel you!'*

The Errant fell to his knees, tilted his head back, and screamed his rage.

And the world trembled anew.

He had forgotten. The chains. The wills locked in an eternal tug of war. The flood waters of fierce emotion rising again and again. The deathless drowning. *I am in the world again. I surrendered my weakness, and am imprisoned by power.* 'Only the weak and useless are truly free,' he whispered.

She heard him. *'No need to be so maudlin, Errant. Go back to the Cedance and see for yourself. Blood now flows between the Tiles. Between them all. The Warrens. The Cedance, at last, maps the truth of things. The truth of things. To use your words, the Tiles now . . . flow.*

*'Can you not taste them? These new Warrens? Come, let us explore them, you and I, and choose our aspect. There are flavours . . . light and dark, shadow and death, life and . . . oh, what is this? The Jesters of Chance, an Unaligned, Oponn? Oponn – dear Errant, you have upstarts standing in your stead. These Twins play your game, Errant.*

*'What will we do about that?'*

'Abyss take me,' the god groaned, sinking down onto the cold, clammy pavestones.

*'Summon him, Errant. He is needed. Now. Summon our Mortal Sword.'*

'I cannot. You damned fool. He is lost to us.'

*'I possess—'*

'I know what you possess. Do you truly think it enough? To wrest him from Mael's grasp? You stupid, pathetic bitch. Now, cease this damned prayer, Destrai. Your every demand weakens me – and that is not smart. Not now. Too soon. I am . . . vulnerable. The Edur—'

*'The Edur warlocks tremble and start at shadows now – they do not know what has happened. All they know is blind terror—'*

'Silence!' the god bellowed. 'Who can reach through those warlocks, you blubbering capabara? *Leave me alone! Now!* '

He was answered with . . . nothing. Sudden absence, a presence recoiling.

'Better,' he snarled.

Yet he remained, slumped onto the cold floor, surrounded in darkness. Thinking. But even thoughts did not come free, without a price.

*Abyss below, I think I have made a mistake. And now I must live with it.*

*And make plans.*

Gadalanak stepped in behind and under his round-shield. A huge hand grasped his arm, wrapping round it just below his shoulder, and a moment later he was flying across the compound, landing hard, skidding then rolling until he crashed up against the wall.

The Meckros warrior groaned, shook his head, then released his short-handled double-bladed axe and reached up to tug clear his helm. 'Not fair,' he said, wincing as he sat up. He glared across at Karsa Orlong. 'The Emperor couldn't have done that.'

'Too bad for him,' the Toblakai rumbled in reply.

'I think you tore something in my arm.'

Samar Dev spoke from where she sat on a chair in the shade, 'Best find a healer, then, Gadalanak.'

'Who else will dare face me?' Karsa demanded, eyeing the half-dozen other warriors as he leaned on his sword. All eyes turned to the masked woman, who stood silent and motionless, worn and weathered like a forgotten statue in some ruin. She seemed indifferent to the attention. And she had yet to draw her two swords.

Karsa snorted. 'Cowards.'

'Hold on,' the one named Puddy said, his scarred face twisting. 'It ain't that, y'damned bhederin bull. It's your style of fighting. No point in learning to deal with it, since this Edur Emperor don't fight that way. He couldn't. I

mean, he ain't got the strength. Nor the reach. Besides, he's civilized – you fight like an animal, Karsa, and you just might take the bastard down – only you won't have to, 'cause I'll do it before you.' He hefted the short javelin in one hand. 'I'll skewer him first – then let's see him fight with a shaft of wood impaling him. I skewer him from six paces, right? Then I close with my cutlass and chop him into pieces.'

Samar Dev stopped listening, since she had heard Puddy's boasts before, and held her gaze on the woman the Meckros warrior had called a Seguleh. First Empire word, that. *The Anvil*. Strange name for a people – probably some remnant clan from the colonial period of Dessimbelackis's empire. A fragment of an army, settled on some pleasant island as their reward for some great victory – those armies were each named, and 'the Anvil' was but a variation on a theme common among the First Empire military. The mask, however, was a unique affectation. Gadalanak said all Seguleh were so attired, and something in the glyphs and scratches on those enamel masks indicated rank. *But if those marks are writing, it's not First Empire. Not even close. Curious. Too bad she never says anything.*

Cradling his shield arm, Gadalanak used the wall to lever himself upright, then set off in search of a healer.

There had been events in the palace, sending tremors far enough to reach the challengers' compound. Perhaps the List had been formalized, the order of the battles decided. A rumour to please the idiotic warriors gathered here – although Karsa's only response to the possibility was a sour grunt. Samar Dev was inclined to agree with him – she was not convinced that the rumour was accurate. No, something else had happened, something messy. *Factions sniping like mongrels at a feast all could share had they any brains. But that's always the way, isn't it? Enough is never enough.*

She felt something then, a shivering along the strands – the bones – buried beneath the flesh of this realm. *This realm . . . and every other one. Gods below* . . . The witch found she was on her feet. Blinking. And in the compound's centre she saw Karsa now facing her, a fierce regard in his bestial eyes. The Toblakai bared his teeth.

Shaking her gaze free of the terrible warrior, she walked quickly into the colonnaded hallway, then through to the passage lined by the cells where the champions were quartered. Down the corridor.

Into her modest room.

She closed the door behind her, already muttering the ritual of sealing. Trouble out there, blood spilled and sizzling like acid. Dreadful events, something old beyond belief, exulting in new power—

Her heart stuttered in her chest. An apparition was rising from the floor in the centre of the room. Shouldering through her wards.

She drew her knife.

*A damned ghost. The ghost of a damned mage, in fact.*

Luminous but faint eyes fixed on her. '*Witch*,' it whispered, '*do not resist, I beg you*.'

'You are not invited,' she said. 'Why would I not resist?'

*'I need your help.'*

'Seems a little late for that.'

*'I am Ceda Kuru Qan.'*

She frowned, then nodded. 'I have heard that name. You fell at the Edur conquest.'

*'Fell? A notion worth consideration. Alas, not now. You must heal someone. Please. I can lead you to her.'*

'Who?'

*'A Letherii. She is named Feather Witch—'*

Samar Dev hissed, then said, 'You chose the wrong person, Ceda Kuru Qan. Heal that blonde rhinazan? If she's dying, I am happy to help her along. That woman gives witches a bad name.'

Another tremor rumbled through the unseen web binding the world.

She saw Kuru Qan's ghost flinch, saw the sudden terror in its eyes.

And Samar Dev spat on her knife blade, darted forward and slashed the weapon through the ghost.

The Ceda's shriek was short-lived, as the iron weapon snared the ghost, drew it inward, trapped it. In her hand the knife's hilt was suddenly cold as ice. Steam slithered from the blade.

She quickly added a few words under her breath, tightening the binding.

Then staggered back until her legs bumped against her cot. She sank down, shivering in the aftermath of the capture. Her eyes fell to the weapon in her hand. 'Gods below,' she mumbled. 'Got another one.'

Moments later the door swung open. Ducking, Karsa Orlong entered.

Samar Dev cursed at him, then said, 'Must you do that?'

'This room stinks, witch.'

'You walk through my wards as if they were cobwebs. Toblakai, it would take a damned god to do what you just did – yet you are no god. I would swear to that on the bones of every poor fool you've killed.'

'I care nothing for your damned wards,' the huge warrior replied, leaning his sword against a wall then taking a single step that placed him in the centre of the room. 'I know that smell. Ghosts, spirits, it's the stink of forgetting.'

'Forgetting?'

'When the dead forget they're dead, witch.'

'Like your friends in that stone sword of yours?'

The eyes that fixed on her were cold as ashes. 'They have cheated death, Samar Dev. Such was my gift. Such was theirs, to turn away from peace. From oblivion. They live because the sword lives.'

'Yes, a warren within a weapon. Don't imagine that as unique as you might want it to be.'

He bared his teeth. 'No. After all, you have that knife.'

She started. 'Hardly a warren in this blade, Karsa Orlong. It's just folded iron. Folded in a very specific way—'

'To fashion a prison. You civilized people are so eager to blunt the meaning of your words. Probably because you have so many of them, which you use too often and for no reason.' He looked round. 'So you have bound a ghost. That is not like you.'

'I could not argue that,' she admitted, 'since I am no longer sure who I am. What I'm supposed to be like.'

'You once told me you did not compel, you did not bind. You bargained.'

'Ah, that. Well, yes, given the choice. Seems that being in your company crushes under heel the privilege of choice, Toblakai.'

'You blame me for your greed?'

'Not greed. More like an overwhelming need for power.'

'To oppose me?'

'You? No, I don't think so. To stay alive, I think. You are dangerous, Karsa Orlong. Your will, your strength, your . . . disregard. You present the quaint and appalling argument that through wilful ignorance of the laws and rules of the universe you cannot suffer their influence. As you might imagine, your very success poses evidence of that tenet, and it is one I cannot reconcile, since it runs contrary to a lifetime of observation.'

'Too many words again, Samar Dev. State it plain.'

'Fine,' she snapped. 'Everything about you terrifies me.'

He nodded. 'And fascinates as well.'

'Arrogant bastard. Believe what you like!'

He turned back to the doorway. Collecting his sword, he said over one shoulder, 'The Seguleh has unsheathed her swords for me, witch.'

Then he was gone.

Samar Dev remained on her cot for another dozen heartbeats, then, 'Damn him!' And she rose, hurrying to arrive before the bout began. *Damn him!*

The sun had crawled far enough to one side of the sky to leave the compound in shadow. As she emerged from the covered colonnade Samar Dev saw the Seguleh standing in the middle of the exercise area, a thin-bladed longsword in each gloved hand. Her dark hair hung in greasy strands down her shoulders, and through the eye-holes of the mask her midnight gaze tracked Karsa Orlong as he strode to join her in the sand-floored clearing.

A full score of champions looked on, indicating that word had travelled, and Samar Dev saw – with shock – the Gral, Taralack Veed, and, behind him, Icarium. *Gods below, the name, the Jhag . . . all that I know, all that I have heard. Icarium is here. A champion.*

*He will leave this city a heap of rubble. He will leave its citizens a mountain of shattered bones. Gods, look at him! Standing calm, so deep in shadow as to be almost invisible – Karsa does not see him, no. The Toblakai's focus rests on the Seguleh, as he circles her at a distance. And she moves like a cat to ever face him.*

*Oh, she is a fighter all right.*

*And Karsa will throw her over the damned wall.*

*If she dares close. As she must. Get inside that huge flint sword.*

*Over the wall. Or through it.*

Her heart pounded, the beat rapid, disturbingly erratic.

She sensed someone at her side and saw, with a jolt of alarm, a Tiste Edur – and she then recognized him. *Preda . . . Tomad. Tomad Sengar.*

*The Emperor's father.*

*Karsa, you don't want this audience—*

* * *

An explosion of motion as the two contestants closed – afterwards, none could agree on who moved first, as if some instinctive agreement was reached between the Seguleh and Karsa, and acted upon faster than thought itself.

And, as iron rang on stone – or stone on iron – Karsa Orlong did something unexpected.

Pounded down with one foot. Hard onto the packed sand.

In the midst of the Seguleh's lithe dance.

Pounded down, hard enough to stagger onlookers as the entire compound floor thundered.

The Seguleh's perfect balance . . . vanished.

No doubt it was but a fraction, the dislodging so minor few would even register it, and no doubt her recovery was as instantaneous – but she was already reeling back to a savage blow with the flat of Karsa's blade, both wrists broken by the impact.

Yet, as she toppled, she twisted, one foot lashing upward towards the Toblakai's crotch.

He caught her kick with one hand, blocking the blow, then boldly lifted her into the air.

She swung the other foot.

And the Toblakai, laughing, released his sword and snagged that leg as well.

And held her there.

Dangling.

Behind Taralack Veed, there was a soft sigh, and the Gral, blinking, turned round.

Icarium smiled. Then said in a low voice, 'We have met, I think. He and I. Perhaps long ago. A duel that was interrupted.'

*By Mappo. Has to be. Mappo, who saw a storm coming between these two. Oh, Trell . . .*

Taralack licked dry lips. 'Would you resume that duel, Icarium?'

The Jhag's brows lifted fractionally. Then he shook his head, leaving that as his answer.

*Thank the spirits.*

From Preda Tomad Sengar, a grunt.

'These games,' Samar Dev ventured, drawing his attention, 'they are intended to entertain, yes? Each contest more challenging than the last.'

The Tiste Edur eyed her, expressionless, then he said, 'Among the audience, there are those who are entertained.'

'Yes.'

After a moment, he added, 'Yes, this Tarthenal will come last. The decision was unanimous among our observers.' Then he shrugged and said, 'I came to see for myself. Although my judgement has no relevance.'

'That Seguleh was very good,' Samar Dev said.

'Perhaps. But she has sparred with no others.'

'They hold her in great respect.'

'Even now? When will he set her down?'

She shook her head.

Tomad Sengar turned away. 'The Tarthenal is superb.'

'And yet your son is better.'

This halted him once more and he stared back at her with narrowed eyes. 'Your Tarthenal is superb,' he repeated. 'But he will die anyway.'

The Tiste Edur walked away.

Finally responding to shouts and entreaties from the onlookers, Karsa Orlong set the woman down onto the ground.

Three Letherii healers rushed in to tend to her.

Collecting his sword, Karsa straightened, then looked round.

*Oh*, thought Samar Dev, *oh no*.

But Icarium was gone. As was his Gral keeper.

The Toblakai walked towards her.

'I didn't need to know,' she said.

'No, you knew already.'

*Oh, gods!*

Then he drew closer and stared down at her. 'The Jhag fled. The Trell who was with him is gone. Probably dead. Now there is a desert warrior I could break with one hand. There would have been none to stop us, this Icarium and me. He knew that. So he fled.'

'You damned fool, Karsa. Icarium is not the kind of warrior who *spars*. Do you understand me?'

'We would not have sparred, Samar Dev.'

'So why spend yourself against him? Is it not these Edur and their Letherii slaves you seek vengeance against?'

'When I am finished with their Emperor, I will seek out Icarium. We will finish what we began.'

'Beware gathering the men before the battering ram, Karsa Orlong.'

'A foolish saying,' he pronounced after a moment.

'Oh, and why is that?'

'Among the Teblor, men *are* the battering ram. Look upon me, Samar Dev. I have fought and won. See the sweat on my muscles? Come lie with me.'

'No, I feel sick.'

'I will make you feel better. I will split you in two.'

'That sounds fun. Go away.'

'Must I hunt down another whore?'

'They all run when they see you now, Karsa Orlong. In the opposite direction, I mean.'

He snorted, then looked round. 'Perhaps the Seguleh.'

'Oh, really! You just broke her arms!'

'She won't need them. Besides, the healers are mending her.'

'Gods below, I'm leaving.'

As she strode away, she heard his rumbling laugh. *Oh, I know you make sport of me. I know and yet I fall into your traps every time. You are too clever, barbarian. Where is that thick-skulled savage? The one to match your pose?*

* * *

Dragging mangled legs, every lurch stabbing pain along the length of his bent, twisted spine, Hannan Mosag squinted ahead, and could just make out the scree of river-polished stones rising like a road between the cliffs of the gorge. He did not know if what he was seeing was real.

Yet it felt right.

*Like home.*

Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadow. Not a fragment, not a torn smear riven through with impurities. Home, as it once was, before all the betrayals ripped it asunder. *Paradise awaits us. In our minds. Ghost images, all perfection assembled by will and will alone. Believe what you see, Hannan Mosag. This is home.*

And yet it resisted. Seeking to reject him, his broken body, his chaos-stained mind.

*Mother Dark. Father Light. Look upon your crippled children. Upon me. Upon Emurlahn. Heal us. Do you not see the world fashioned in my mind? All as it once was. I hold still to this purity, to all that I sought to create in the mortal realm, among the tribes I brought to heel – the peace I demanded, and won.*

*None could have guessed my deepest desire. The Throne of Shadow – it was for me. And by my rule, Kurald Emurlahn would grow strong once again. Whole. Rightfully in its place.*

*Yes, there was chaos – the raw unbound power coursing like impassable rivers, isolating every island of Shadow. But I would have used that chaos – to heal.*

*Chains. Chains to draw the fragments together, to bind them together.*

*The Fallen God was a tool, nothing more.*

But Rhulad Sengar had destroyed all that. In the reach of a child's hand. And now, everything was dying. Poisoned. Crumbling into dissolution.

He reached the base of the scree, smooth round pebbles clacking beneath his clawed fingers. Coarse sand under his nails, wet, biting. *My world*.

Rain falling in wisps of mist, the pungent smell of moss and rotting wood. And on the wind . . . the sea. Surmounting the steep slope of stones, the boles of Blackwood trees stood arrayed like sentinels.

There were no invasive demons here. This world was the world of the Tiste Edur.

The shadow of a gliding owl slipped over the glistening slide, crossing his intended path, and Hannan Mosag froze.

*No. It cannot be. There is no-one alive to claim that title.*

*He is dead.*

*He was not even Tiste Edur!*

And yet, who stood alone before Rhulad Sengar? *Yes, she has his severed finger. The owl – most ancient of omens – the owl, to mark the coming of*

*the one.*

Yet anger surged within him.

*It is for me to choose. Me! Mother Dark! Father Light! Guide me to the Throne of Shadow. Emurlahn reborn! It is this, I tell you both, this or the King in Chains, and behind him the Crippled God! Hear my offer!*

'Andii, Liosan, Edur, the *Armies of the Tiste*. No betrayal. The betrayals are done – bind us to our words as you have bound each other. Light, Dark and Shadow, the first elements of existence. Energy and void and the ceaseless motion of the ebb and flow between them. These three forces – the first, the greatest, the purest. Hear me. I would so pledge the Edur to this alliance! Send to me those who would speak for the Andii. The Liosan. Send them – bring your children together!

'Mother Dark. Father Light. I await your word. I await . . .'

He could go no further.

Weeping, Hannan Mosag rested his head on the stones. 'As you say,' he muttered. 'I will not deny the omen. Very well, it is not for me to choose.

'He shall be our Mortal Sword of Emurlahn – no, not the old title. The new one, to suit this age. Mortal Sword.' *Madness – why would he even agree? Letherii . . .*

'So be it.'

Dusk had arrived. Yet he felt a sliver of warmth against one cheek, and he lifted his head. The clouds had broken, there, to the east – a welling band of darkness.

And, to the west, another slash parting the overcast.

The lurid glow of the sun.

'So be it,' he whispered.

Bruthen Trana stepped back as the prostrate Warlock King flinched, Hannan Mosag's legs drawing up like an insect in death.

A moment later, the warlock's bloodshot eyes prised open. And seemed to see nothing for a moment. Then they flicked upward. 'Warrior,' he said thickly, then grimaced and spat a throatful of phlegm onto the grimy pavestones. 'Bruthen Trana. K'ar Penath speaks boldly of your loyalty, your honour. You are Tiste Edur – as we all once were. Before – before Rhulad.' He coughed, then pushed himself into a sitting position, raising his head with obvious effort to glower up at Bruthen Trana. 'And so, I must send you away.'

'Warlock King, I serve this empire—'

'Errant take this damned empire! You serve the Tiste Edur!'

Bruthen Trana regarded the broken creature below, said nothing.

'I know,' Hannan Mosag said, 'you would lead our warriors – through the palace above us. Room by room, cutting down every one of the Chancellor's pernicious spies. Cutting Rhulad free of the snaring web spun about him – but that fool on his throne could not recognize freedom if it sprouted wings on his shoulders. He will see it as an attack, a rebellion. Listen to me! Leave the Chancellor to us!'

'And Karos Invictad?'

'All of them, Bruthen Trana. So I vow before you.'

'Where do you wish me to go, Warlock King? After Fear Sengar?'

Hannan Mosag started, then shook his head. 'No. But I dare not speak the name of the one you must find. Here, in this realm, the Crippled God courses in my veins – where I travelled a few moments ago, I was free then. To understand. To . . . pray.'

'How will I know where to look? How will I know when I find the one you seek?'

The Warlock King hesitated. He licked his lips, then said, 'He is dead. But not dead. Distant, yet is summoned. His tomb lies empty, yet was never occupied. He is never spoken of, though his touch haunts us all again and again.'

Bruthen Trana raised a hand – not surprised to see that it trembled. 'No more. Where shall I find the beginning of the path?'

'Where the sun dies. I think.'

The warrior scowled. 'West? But you are not sure?'

'I am not. I dare not.'

'Am I to travel alone?'

'For you to decide, Bruthen Trana. But before all else, you must get something – an item – from the Letherii slave. Feather Witch – she hides beneath the Old Palace—'

'I know those tunnels, Warlock King. What is this item?'

Hannan Mosag told him.

He studied the twisted warlock for a moment longer – the avid gleam in Hannan Mosag's eyes bright as fever – then spun round and strode from the chamber.

Bearing lanterns, the squad of guards formed a pool of lurid yellow light that glimmered along the waters of Quillas Canal as they trudged, amidst clanking weapons and desultory muttering, across the bridge. Once on the other side, the squad turned right to follow the main avenue towards the Creeper district.

As soon as the glow trundled away, Tehol nudged Ublala and they hurried onto the bridge. Glancing back at the half-blood, Tehol scowled, then hissed, 'Watch me, you fool! See? I'm skulking. No – hunch down, look about suspiciously, skitter this way and that. Duck down, Ublala!'

'But then I can't see.'

'*Quiet!* '

'Sorry. Can we get off this bridge?'

'First, let me see you skulk. Go on, you need to practise.'

Grumbling, Ublala Pung hunched low, his beetled brow rippling as he looked first one way, then the other.

'Nice,' Tehol said. 'Now, hurry up and skulk after me.'

'All right, Tehol. It's just that there's the curfew, and I don't want trouble.'

They reached the other side and Tehol led the way, thirty paces into the wake of the guards, then an abrupt cut to the left, coming within sight of the Tolls Repository. Into an alley, where he crouched, then gestured frantically for Ublala to do the same.

'All right,' he whispered, 'do you know which wing?'

Ublala blinked in the gloom. 'What?'

'Do you know where this Tarthenal is quartered?'

'Yes. With all the other champions.'

'Good. Where is that?'

'Well, it must be somewhere.'

'Good thinking, Ublala. Now, stay close to me. I am, after all, a master of this thieving skulduggery.'

'Really? But Bugg said—'

'What? What did my miserable manservant say? About me? Behind my back?'

Ublala shrugged. 'Lots of things. I mean, nothing. Oh, you misheard me, Tehol. I didn't say anything. You're not a clumsy oaf with a head full of grander delusions, or anything. Like that.' He brightened. 'You want me to box him about the ears again?'

'Later. Here's what I think. Near the Imperial Barracks, but a wing of the Eternal Domicile. Or between the Eternal Domicile and the Old Palace.'

Ublala was nodding.

'So,' Tehol continued, 'shall we get going?'

'Where?'

'Somehow I don't think this night is going to go well. Never mind, just stay with me.'

A quick peek into the street, up one way, down the other, then Tehol moved out, keeping low against the near wall. As they drew closer to the Eternal Domicile, the shadows diminished – lantern poles at intersections, broader streets, and there soldiers positioned at postern gates, outside corner blockhouses, soldiers, in fact, everywhere.

Tehol tugged Ublala into the last usable alley, where they crouched once more in gloom. 'This looks bad,' he whispered. 'There's people, Ublala. Well, listen, it was a good try. But we've been bested by superior security and that's that.'

'They're all standing in their own light,' Ublala said. 'They can't see nothing, Tehol. Besides, I got in mind a diversion.'

'A diversion like your usual diversions, Ublala? Forget it. Shurq Elalle's told me about that last time—'

'Yes, like that. It worked, didn't it?'

'But that was to get her inside the Gerrun Estate – her, not you. Aren't you the one who wants to talk to this champion?'

'That's why you're doing the diversion, Tehol.'

'Me? Are you mad?'

'It's the only way.'

They heard the scuff of boots from the street, then a loud voice: '*There! Who's skulking in that alley?*'

Ublala flinched down. 'How did he know?'

'We better run!'

They bolted, as a spear of lantern-light lanced across the alley mouth; then, pursued by shouting soldiers, the two fugitives reached the far end of

the alley.

Where Tehol went left.

And Ublala went right.

Alarms resounded in the night.

* * *

The answering of his prayers was nothing like Bruthen Trana had imagined. Not through the grotesque creature that was Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King. The very man who had started the Edur down this path of dissolution. Ambition, greed and betrayal – it was all Bruthen could manage to stand still before Hannan Mosag, rather than strangle the life from the Warlock King.

Yet from that twisted mouth had come . . . hope. It seemed impossible. Macabre. Mocking Bruthen Trana's visions of heroic salvation. *Rhulad falls – the whole Sengar bloodline obliterated – and then . . . Hannan Mosag. For his crimes. Honour can be won – I will see to that.*

*This is how it must be.*

He was not unduly worried over the Letherii. The Chancellor would not live much longer. The palace would be purged. The Patriotists would be crushed, their agents slain, and those poor prisoners whose only crime, as far as he could tell, was to disagree with the practices of the Patriotists – those prisoners, Letherii one and all, could be freed. There was no real sedition at work here. No treason. Karos Invictad used such accusations as if they encompassed a guilt that needed no proof, as if they justified any treatment of the accused he desired. Ironically, in so doing he subverted humanity itself, making him the most profound traitor of all.

But not even that mattered much. Bruthen Trana did not like the man, a dislike that seemed reason enough to kill the bastard. Karos Invictad took pleasure in cruelty, making him both pathetic and dangerous. If he were permitted to continue, there was the very real risk that the Letherii people would rise up in true rebellion, and the gutters in every city of the empire

would run crimson. *No matter. I do not like him. For years I was witness to his contempt for me, there in his eyes. I will brook the affront no longer.*

This, more than anything else, dismayed Bruthen Trana. Hannan Mosag's insisting he leave immediately – for some place where the sun dies. *West. But no, not west. The Warlock King misunderstood his own vision—*

A sudden thought, slowing his steps as he made his way down into the subterranean corridors and chambers beneath the Old Palace. *Who answered his prayers? Who showed him this path? He suggested it was not this Crippled God. Father Shadow? Has Scabandari Bloodeye returned to us?*

*No, he has not. Then . . . who?*

A moment later, Bruthen Trana scowled, then cursed under his breath and resumed his journey. *I am given hope and what do I do? Seek to kill it with my own hands. No, I understand the path – better than Hannan Mosag himself.*

*Where the sun dies is not to the west.*

*It is beneath the waves. In the depths.*

*Did not a demon of the seas retrieve his body? No, Hannan Mosag, you dare not name him. He is not even Tiste Edur. Yet he must be our salvation.*

He reached the sloping tunnel that would take him to the slave's supposedly secret abode. These Letherii were indeed pathetic.

*We each carry a whisper of Emurlahn within us – each and every Tiste Edur. This is why no slave among the tribes could escape us.*

Except for one, he corrected himself. Udinaas. But then, the K'risnan knew where he was – or so Bruthen Trana suspected. They knew, yet chose to do nothing.

It was no wonder Rhulad did not trust them.

*Nor do I.*

He could smell the stench of bitter magic as he drew nearer, and he heard her muttering in her chamber, and knew that something had changed. In the one named Feather Witch. In the power she possessed.

Well, he would give her no time to prepare.

Feather Witch looked up in fear and alarm as the Tiste Edur warrior strode in. Squealing, she backed away until brought short by a wall, then sank down and covered her face.

The stark intent in the warrior's face was fierce.

He grasped her by the hair and yanked her to her feet, then higher, the pain forcing a shriek from her.

With his other hand he grasped the small leather pouch between her breasts. When he tore it loose, the thong cut like wire across the back of her neck and behind one ear. She could feel blood. She thought that her ear had very nearly been cut loose, that it hung by a strand of—

He flung her back down. Her head cracked against the stone of the wall. She slumped onto the floor, ragged sobbing erupting from her heaving chest.

And listened – beyond the close roar of blood in her skull – to his dwindling footsteps.

He had taken the severed finger.

*He goes to find the soul of Brys Beddict.*

Tehol staggered into the single room, collapsed down near the hearth. Sheathed in sweat, gasping to gain his breath.

Bugg, seated with his back to a wall and sipping tea, slowly raised his brows. 'Afflicted with the delusion of competence, I see.'

'That – that's what you said – to Ublala? You cruel, heartless—'

'The observation was made regarding all mortals, actually.'

'He didn't take it that way!'

Janath spoke from where she sat sipping from her own chipped clay cup. 'All those alarms ringing through the city are because of you, Tehol Beddict?'

'They will be on the lookout now,' Bugg observed, 'for a man wearing a blanket.'

'Well,' Tehol retorted, 'there must be plenty of those, right?'

There was no immediate reply.

'There must be,' Tehol insisted, a little wildly even to his own ears. He hastened on in a more reasonable tone. 'The ever growing divide between the rich and the poor and all that. Why, blankets are the new fashion among the destitute. I'm sure of it.'

Neither listener said anything, then both sipped from their cups.

Scowling, Tehol said, 'What's that you're drinking?'

'Hen tea,' Bugg said.

'Soup, you mean.'

'No,' said Janath. 'Tea.'

'Wait, where are all the chickens?'

'On the roof,' Bugg said.

'Won't they fall off?'

'One or two might. We do regular rounds. So far, they have displayed uncharacteristic cleverness. Rather unique for this household.'

'Oh right, kick the exhausted fugitive why don't you? They probably caught poor old Ublala.'

'Maybe. He did have a diversion in mind.'

Tehol's eyes narrowed on his manservant. 'Those wisps above your ears need trimming. Janath, find me a knife, will you?'

'No.'

'You *would* side with him, wouldn't you?'

'Bugg is actually a very capable man, Tehol. You don't deserve him, you know.'

'I assure you, Scholar, the undeservedness is mutual.'

'What does that mean?'

'You know, from the smell I think I could make a strong argument that hen tea is no different from watery chicken soup, or, at the very least, broth.'

'You never could grasp semantics, Tehol Beddict.'

'I couldn't grasp much of anything, I seem to recall. Yet I will defend my diligence, my single-minded lust for seductive knowledge, the purity of true academic . . . uh, pursuit – why, I could go on and on—'

'Ever your flaw, Tehol.'

'—but I won't, cursed as I am with an unappreciative audience. So tell me, Bugg, why was Ublala so eager to talk to this true blood Tarthenal?'

'He wishes to discover, I imagine, if the warrior is a god.'

'A what?'

'A new god, I mean. Or an ascendant, to be more precise. I doubt there are worshippers involved. Yet.'

'Well, Tarthenal only worship what terrifies them, right? This is just some warrior doomed to die by the Emperor's sword. Hardly the subject to inspire poor Ublala Pung.'

To that Bugg simply shrugged.

Tehol wiped sweat from his brow. 'Give me some of that hen tea, will you?'

'With or without?'

'With or without what?'

'Feathers.'

'That depends. Are they clean feathers?'

'They are now,' Bugg replied.

'All right, then, since I can't think of anything more absurd. With.'

Bugg reached for a clay cup. 'I knew I could count on you, Master.'

She woke to a metallic clang out in the corridor.

Sitting up, Samar Dev stared into the darkness of her room.

She thought she could hear breathing, just outside her door, then, distinctly, a muted whimper.

She rose, wrapping the blanket about her, and padded to the doorway. Lifted the latch and swung the flimsy barrier aside.

'Karsa?'

The huge figure spun to face her.

'No,' she then said. 'Not Karsa. Who are you?'

'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'The one like me. Which room?'

Samar Dev edged out into the corridor. She looked to the left and saw the motionless forms of the two palace guards normally stationed to either side of the corridor's entranceway. Their helmed heads were conspicuously close together, and those iron pots were both severely dented. 'You killed them?'

The huge man glanced over, then grunted. 'They were looking the wrong way.'

'You mean they didn't see you.'

'Maybe my hands.'

The nonsensical yet oddly satisfying exchange had been in whispers. Samar Dev gestured that he follow and set off up the corridor until she

came to the door to Karsa Orlong's room. 'He's in here.'

'Knock,' the giant ordered. 'Then walk in ahead of me.'

'Or else?'

'Or else I knock your head . . . together.'

Sighing, she reached towards the door with one fist.

It opened and the point of a stone sword suddenly hovered in the hollow of her throat.

'Who is that behind you, witch?'

'You have a visitor,' she replied. 'From . . . outside.'

Karsa Orlong, naked above the waist, his escaped slave tattoos a crazed web reaching down to his shoulders and chest, withdrew the sword and stepped back.

The stranger pushed Samar Dev to one side and entered the small room.

Whereupon he sank down to his knees, head bowing. 'Pure one,' he said, the words like a prayer.

Samar Dev edged in and shut the door behind her, as Karsa Orlong tossed his sword on the cot, then reached down with one hand – and hammered the stranger in the side of the head.

Rocking the man. Blood started from his nostrils and he blinked stupidly up at Karsa.

Who said, 'There is Toblakai blood in you. Toblakai kneel to no-one.'

Samar Dev crossed her arms and leaned back against the door. 'First lesson when dealing with Karsa Orlong,' she murmured. 'Expect the unexpected.'

The huge man struggled back to his feet, wiping at the blood on his face. He was not as tall as Karsa, but almost as wide. 'I am Ublala Pung, of the Tarthenal—'

'Tarthenal.'

Samar Dev said, 'A mixed-blood remnant of some local Toblakai population. Used to be more in the city – I certainly have not seen any others out in the markets and such. But they've virtually vanished, just like most of the other tribes the Letherii subjugated.'

Ublala half turned to glower at her. 'Not vanished. Defeated. And now those who are left live on islands in the Draconean Sea.'

At the word 'defeated', Samar Dev saw Karsa scowl.

Ublala faced the Toblakai once more, then said, with strange awkwardness, 'Lead us, War Leader.'

Sudden fire in Karsa's eyes and he met Samar Dev's gaze. 'I told you once, witch, that I would lead an army of my kind. It has begun.'

'They're not Toblakai—'

'If but one drop of Toblakai blood burns in their veins, witch, then they are Toblakai.'

'Decimated by Letherii sorcery—'

A sneer. 'Letherii sorcery? I care naught.'

Ublala Pung, however, was shaking his head. 'Even with our greatest shamans, Pure One, we could not defeat it. Why, Arbanat himself—'

This time it was Samar Dev who interrupted. 'Ublala, I have seen Karsa Orlong *push* his way through that sorcery.'

The mixed-blood stared at her, mouth agape. 'Push?' The word was mostly mouthed, the barest of whispers.

Despite herself, she nodded. 'I wish I could tell you otherwise, you poor bastard. I wish I could tell you to run away and hide with your kin on those islands, because this one here makes empty promises. Alas, I cannot. He does not make empty promises. Not so far, anyway. Of course,' she added with a shrug that belied the bitterness she felt, 'this Edur Emperor will kill him.'

To that, Ublala Pung shook his head.

Denial? Dismay?

Karsa Orlong addressed Ublala: 'You must leave when this is done, warrior. You must travel to your islands and gather our people, then bring them here. You are now my army. I am Karsa Orlong, Toblakai and Teblor. I am your war leader.'

'The marks on your face,' Ublala whispered.

'What of them?'

'As shattered as the Tarthenal. As the Toblakai – broken, driven apart. So the oldest legends say – scattered, by ice, by betrayal . . .'

An icy draught seemed to flow up around Samar Dev, like a cold wave engulfing a rock, and she shivered. *Oh, I dislike the sound of that, since it echoes the truth of things. Too clearly.*

'Yet see my face behind it,' Karsa said. 'Two truths. What was and what will be. Do you deny this, Ublala of the Tarthenal?'

A mute shake of the head. Then the warrior shot another glance at Samar Dev, before saying, 'War Leader, I have words. Of . . . of Rhulad Sengar, the Edur Emperor.

Words . . . of his secret.'

'Leave us, witch,' Karsa said.

She started. 'What? Not a chance—'

'Leave us or I will instruct my warrior to knock your head together.'

'Oh, so now it's idiocy that inspires you?'

'Samar Dev,' Karsa said. 'This warrior has defeated every barrier surrounding this compound. I am not interested in his words. Did you not hear the alarms? He fights as would a Toblakai.'

'They tried Drowning me too, once,' Ublala said.

Samar Dev snorted. 'With him around, it truly is a struggle to remain solemn, never mind dignified. A cure for pomposity, Karsa Orlong – be sure to keep this one at your side.'

'Go.'

She gestured with sudden contempt. 'Oh, fine, on with you two, then. Later, Karsa, I will remind you of one thing.'

'What?'

She opened the door behind her. 'This oaf couldn't even find your room.'

Out in the corridor, Samar Dev heard a stirring from one of the guards, then a groan and then, distinctly: 'What are all those lights?'

# CHAPTER TWELVE

I looked to the west and saw a thousand suns setting.

Sidivar Trelus

The earthy smell of the dung-fires preceded the first sighting of the Awl army. Beneath the smudged light of a dull moon, the Atri-Preda and Brohl Handar rode with the scout troop to the base of a ridge, where they dismounted and, leaving one soldier with the horses, set out on foot up the slope.

The summit was almost devoid of grasses, knobs of angular bedrock pushing through where the ceaseless winds had eroded away the scant soil. Dropping down low, the half-dozen Letherii and one Tiste Edur edged up between the outcroppings, filling the spaces in the broken spine of basalt.

Beyond, perhaps a third of a league distant, burned the cookfires of the enemy. A sea of fallen, smouldering stars, spreading out to fill the basin of an entire valley, then up the far slope, defining its contours.

'How many do you judge?' Brohl Handar asked the Atri-Preda in a low voice.

Bivatt sighed. 'Combatants? Maybe ten, eleven thousand. These armies are more like migrations, Overseer. Everyone tags along.'

'Then where are the herds?'

'Probably the other side of the far valley.'

'So tomorrow, we ride to battle.'

'Yes. And again, I advise that you and your bodyguard remain with the train—'

'That will not be necessary,' Brohl Handar cut in, repeating words he had uttered a dozen times in the past three days and nights. 'There are Edur

warriors with you, and they will be used, yes?'

'If needed, Overseer. But the fight awaiting us looks to be no different from all the others we Letherii have had against these people of the plains. It looks as if Redmask was not able to sway the elders with any new schemes. It's the old tactics – the ones that fail them time and again.' She was silent for a moment, then she continued, 'The valley behind us is called Bast Fulmar. It has some arcane significance for the Awl. That is where we will meet.'

He turned his head and studied her in the gloom. 'You are content to let them choose the place of battle?'

She snorted. 'Overseer, if these lands were filled with defiles, canyons, arroyos or impassable rivers – or forests – then indeed I would think carefully about engaging the enemy where they want us to. But not here. Visibility is not an issue – with our mages the Awl cannot hide in any case. There are no difficult avenues of retreat, no blinds. The fight tomorrow will be brutal in its simplicity. Awl ferocity against Letherii discipline.'

'And with this Redmask leading them, they will be ferocious indeed.'

'Yes. But it will fail in the end.'

'You are confident, Atri-Preda.'

He caught her smile. 'Relieved, Overseer. This night, I see only what I have seen a dozen times before. Do not imagine, however, that I am dismissing the enemy. It will be bloody.' With that she gestured, and the group began withdrawing from the ridgeline.

As they made their way down to the waiting horses, Brohl Handar said, 'I saw no pickets, Atri-Preda. Nor mounted outriders. Does that not seem odd to you?'

'No. They know we are close. They wanted us to see that camp.'

'To achieve what? Some pointless effort to overawe us?'

'Something like that, yes.'

*You invite me to feel contempt for these Awl. Why? So that you can justify not using the Tiste Edur? The K'risnan? You want this victory on the morrow to be Letherii. You do not want to find yourself beholden to the Edur – not for this grand theft of land and beast, this harvesting of slaves.*

*So, I suspect, the Factor instructed. Letur Anict is not one to share the spoils.*

*I, Atri-Preda, am not relieved.*

'Stone-tipped arrows – you are truly a fool. They will break against Letherii armour. I can expect nothing from you. At least I discover that now, instead of in the midst of battle.'

Toc Anaster settled back on his haunches and watched Torrent march out of the firelight. Off . . . somewhere. *Somewhere important. Like the latrines.* He resumed examining the fletching on the Imass arrows. *Gift of an old friend. That clunking, creaking collection of droll bones.* He could barely recall the last time he was among friends. Gruntle, perhaps. Another continent. A drunken evening – was that Saltoan wine? Gredfallan ale? He couldn't recall.

Surrounding him, the murmur of thousands – their moving through the camp, their quiet conversations around the cookfires. Old men and old women, the lame, the young. A fire burning for each and every Awl.

*And somewhere out on the plain, Redmask and his warriors – a night without fires, without conversations. Nothing, I imagine, but the soft honing of weapon edges. Iron and stone whispering in the night.*

A simple deceit, its success dependent on Letherii expectations. Enemy scouts had spotted this camp, after all. As predicted. Countless fires in the darkness, appropriately close to Bast Fulmar, the site of the impending battle. All the way it was supposed to be.

But Redmask had other plans. And to aid in the deception, Toc suspected, some arcane sorcery from the K'Chain Che'Malle.

An elder appeared, walking into the fire's glow on bowed legs. Toc had seen this one speaking to Redmask, often riding at the war leader's side. He

crouched down opposite Toc and studied him for a dozen heartbeats, then spat into the flames, nodded at the answering sizzle, and spoke: 'I do not trust you.'

'I'm crushed.'

'Those arrows, they are bound in ritual magic. Yet no spirit has blessed them. What sort of sorcery is that? Letherii? Are you a creature of the Tiles and Holds? A traitor in our midst. You plot betrayal, vengeance against our abandoning you.'

'Trying to inspire me, Elder? Sorry to disappoint you, but there are no embers in the ashes, nothing to stir to life.'

'You are young.'

'Not as young as you think. Besides, what has that to do with anything?'

'Redmask likes you.'

Toc scratched the scar where an eye had been. 'Are your wits addled by age?'

A grunt. 'I know secrets.'

'Me too.'

'None to compare with mine. I was there when Redmask's sister killed herself.'

'And I suckled at the tit of a K'Chain Che'Malle Matron. If tit is the right word.'

The old man's face twisted in disbelief. 'That is a good lie. But it is not the game I am playing. I saw with my own eyes the great sea canoes. Upon the north shore. Thousands upon thousands.'

Toc began returning the arrows to the hide quiver. 'These arrows were made by a dead man. Dead for a hundred thousand years, or more.'

The wrinkled scowl opposite him deepened. 'I have seen skeletons running in the night – on this very plain.'

'This body you see isn't mine. I stole it.'

'I alone know the truth of Bast Fulmar.'

'This body's father was a dead man – he gasped his last breath even as his seed was taken on a field of battle.'

'The victory of long ago was in truth a defeat.'

'This body grew strong on human meat.'

'Redmask will betray us.'

'This mouth waters as I look at you.'

The old man pushed himself to his feet. 'Evil speaks in lies.'

'And the good know only one truth. But it's a lie, because there's always more than one truth.'

Another throatful of phlegm into the campfire. Then a complicated series of gestures, the inscribing in the air above the flames of a skein of wards that seemed to swirl for a moment in the thin smoke. 'You are banished,' the elder then pronounced.

'You have no idea, old man.'

'I think you should have died long ago.'

'More times than I can count. Started with a piece of a moon. Then a damned puppet, then . . . oh, never mind.'

'Torrent says you will run. In the end. He says your courage is broken.'

Toc looked down into the flames. 'That may well be,' he said.

'He will kill you then.'

'Assuming he can catch me. If there's one thing I know how to do, it's ride a horse.'

With a snarl, the elder stormed off.

'Courage,' Toc muttered to himself. 'Yes, there is that. And maybe cowardice truly is bred in the very bones.' *Because let's face it, Anaster was no cold iron. Nor hot, for that matter.*

From somewhere in the night came the keening howl of a wolf.

Toc grunted. 'Yes, well, it's not as if I had the privilege of choice, is it? I wonder if any of us has. Ever.' He raised his voice slightly, 'You know, Torrent – yes, I see you hulking out there – it occurs to me, given the precedent, that the question of cowardice is one your Awl must face, tomorrow. I have no doubt Redmask – if he has any concerns – is thinking on that right now. Wondering. Can he bully all of you into honour?'

The vague shape that was Torrent moved off.

Toc fell silent, tossed yet another lump of rodara dung onto the fire, and thought about old friends long gone.

The lone line of scuffed footprints ended with a figure, trudging up the distant slope of clay and pebbles. That was the thing about following a trail, Hedge reminded himself. Easy to forget the damned prints belonged to something real, especially after what seemed weeks of tracking the bastard.

T'lan Imass, as he had suspected. Those splayed, bony feet dragged too much, especially with an arch so high it left no imprint. True, some bowlegged Wickan might leave something similar, but not walking at a pace that stayed ahead of Hedge for this long. Not a chance of that. Still, it was odd that the ancient undead warrior was walking at all.

Easier traversing this wasteland as dust.

*Maybe it's too damp. Maybe it's no fun being mud. I'll have to ask it that.*

*Assuming it doesn't kill me outright. Or try to, I mean. I keep forgetting that I'm already dead. If there's one thing the dead should remember, it's that crucial detail, don't you think, Fid? Bah, what would you know. You're still alive. And not here either.*

*Hood take me, I'm in need of company.*

Not that damned whispering wind, though. Good thing it had fled, in tatters, unable to draw any closer to this T'lan Imass with – yes – but one arm. *Beat up thing, ain't it just?*

He was sure it knew he was here, a thousand paces behind it. *Probably knows I'm a ghost, too. Which is why it hasn't bothered attacking me.*

*I think I'm getting used to this.*

Another third of a league passed before Hedge was able to draw close enough to finally snare the undead warrior's regard. Halting, slowly turning about. The flint weapon in its lone hand was more a cutlass than a sword, its end strangely hooked. A hilt had been fashioned from the palmate portion of an antler, creating a shallow, tined bell-guard polished brown with age. Part of the warrior's face had been brutally smashed: but one side of its heavy jaw was intact, giving its ghastly mien a lopsided cant.

'Begone, ghost,' the T'lan Imass said in a ravaged voice.

'Well I would,' Hedge replied, 'only it seems we're heading in the same direction.'

'That cannot be.'

'Why?'

'Because you do not know where I am going.'

'Oh, perfect Imass logic. In other words, absurd idiocy. No, I don't know precisely where you are going, but it is undeniably to be found in the same direction as where I am headed. Is that too sharp an observation for you?'

'Why do you hold to your flesh?'

'The same reason, I suppose, why you hold on to what's left of yours. Listen, I am named Hedge. I was once a soldier, a Bridgeburner. Malazan marines. Are you some cast-off from Logros T'lan Imass?'

The warrior said nothing for a moment, then, 'I was once of Kron T'lan Imass. Born in the Season of Blood-from-the- Mountain to the clan of Eptr Phinana. My own blood arrived on the shores of Jagra Til. I am Emroth.'

'A woman?'

A clattering, uneven shrug.

'Well, Emroth, what are you doing walking across Hood's forgotten ice-pit?'

'There is no pit here.'

'As you say.' Hedge looked round. 'Is this where abandoned T'lan Imass go, then?'

'Not here,' Emroth replied. Then the cutlass lifted and slowly pointed.

Ahead. The direction Hedge had decided to call north. 'What, are we headed towards a huge pile of frozen bones, then?'

Emroth turned and began walking once more.

Hedge moved up alongside the undead creature. 'Were you beautiful once, Emroth?'

'I do not remember.'

'I was hopeless with women,' Hedge said. 'My ears are too big – yes, that's why I wear this leather cap. And I got knobby knees. It's why I became a soldier, you know. To meet women. And then I discovered that women soldiers are scary. I mean, a lot more scary than normal women, which is saying something. I guess with you Imass, well, everyone was a warrior, right?'

'I understand,' Emroth said.

'You do? Understand what?'

'Why you have no companions, Hedge of the Bridgeburners.'

'You're not going to turn into a cloud of dust on me, are you?'

'In this place, I cannot. Alas.'

Grinning, Hedge resumed, 'It's not like I died a virgin or anything, of course. Even ugly bastards like me – well, so long as there's enough coin in

your hand. But I'll tell you something, Emroth, that's not what you'd call love now, is it? So anyway, the truth of it is, I never shared that with anybody. Love. I mean, from the time I stopped being a child, right up until I died.

'Now there was this soldier, once. She was big and mean. Named Detoran. She decided she loved me, and showed it by beating me senseless. So how do you figure that one? Well, I've got it worked out. You see, she was even less lovable than me. Poor old cow. Wish I'd understood that at the time. But I was too busy running away from her. Funny how that is, isn't it?

'She died, too. And so I had a chance to, you know, talk to her. Since we found ourselves in the same place. Her problem was, she couldn't put enough words together to make a real sentence. Not thick, much. Just inarticulate. People like that, how can you guess what's in their mind? They can't tell you, so the guessing stays guessing and most of the time you're so wrong it's pathetic. Well, we worked it out, more or less. I think. She said even less as a ghost.

'But that's the thing with it all, Emroth. There's the big explosion, the white, then black, then you're stirring awake all over again. A damned ghost with nowhere worthwhile to go, and all you're left with is realizations and regrets. And a list of wishes longer than Hood's—'

'No more, Hedge of the Bridgeburners,' Emroth interjected, the tremor of emotion in its voice. 'I am not a fool. I comprehend this game of yours. But my memories are not for you.'

Hedge shrugged. 'Not for you either, I gather. Gave them all away to wage war against the Jaghut. They were so evil, so dangerous, you made of yourselves your first victims. Kind of a backwards kind of vengeance, wouldn't you say? Like you went and done their work for them. And the real joke is, they weren't much evil or dangerous at all. Oh, maybe a handful, but those handful earned the wrath of their kin real fast – often long before you and your armies even showed up. They could police themselves just fine. They flung glaciers at you, so what did you do to defeat that? Why, you made your hearts even colder, even more lifeless than any glacier. Hood knows, that's irony for you.'

'I am unbound,' Emroth said in a rasp. 'My memories remain with me. It is these memories that have broken me.'

'Broken?'

Another shrug. 'Hedge of the Bridgeburners, unlike you, I remember love.'

Neither spoke for a time after that. The wind whipped bitter and dry. The crusted remnants of snow crackled underfoot in the beds of moss and lichen. On the horizon ahead there was a slate-grey ridge of some sort, angular like a massed line of toppled buildings. Above it the sky was milky white. Hedge gestured northward. 'So, Emroth, is that it?'

The half-shattered head lifted. 'Omtose Phellack.'

'Really? But—'

'We must cross it.'

'Oh, and what lies beyond?'

The T'lan Imass halted and stared at Hedge with its withered, shadow-shrunken eyes. 'I am not sure,' it replied. 'But, I now believe, it may be . . . home.'

*Damn you, Emroth. You've just made things a lot harder.*

The temple stood on a low hill, the land barren on all sides. Its huge cyclopean walls looked battered, shoved inward as if by ten thousand stone fists. Crooked fissures tracked the dark grey granite from ground level to the massive lintel stone leaning drunkenly above what had once been a grand, noble entranceway. The remnants of statues jutted from pedestals set to either side of the broad, now sagging steps.

Udinaas did not know where he was. Just another dream, or what started as a dream. Doomed, like all the others, to slide into something far worse.

And so he waited, trembling, his legs crippled, broken and lifeless beneath him – a new variation on the theme of incapacity. Bludgeoning symbol to his many flaws. The last time, he recalled, he had been squirming

on the ground, limbless, a broken-backed snake. It seemed his subconscious lacked subtlety, a most bitter admission.

Unless, of course, someone or something else was sending these visitations.

And now, corpses had appeared on the stony slopes beneath the temple. Scores, then hundreds.

Tall, skin pale as the shell of turtle eggs, red-rimmed eyes set deep in elongated, chiselled faces, and too many joints on their long limbs, transforming their stiff expressions of death into something surreal, fevered – but that last detail was no surprise.

And now, a smudge of motion in the darkness beneath the lintel stone. A figure staggering into view. Unlike the dead. No, this one looked . . . *human*.

Splashed in blood from head to toe, the man reeled forward, halted at the top of the steps and looked round with wild, enraged eyes. Then, flinging his head back, he screamed at the colourless sky.

No words. Just fury.

Udinaas recoiled, sought to drag himself away.

And the figure saw him. One crimson, dripping hand, lifting, reaching out for him. Beckoning.

As if grasped by the throat, Udinaas lurched closer to the man, to the temple, to the cold scree of corpses. 'No,' he muttered, 'not me. Choose someone else. Not me.'

*'Can you feel this grief, mortal?'*

'Not for me!'

*'But it is. You are the only one left. Are their deaths to be empty, forgotten, without meaning?'*

Udinaas tried to hold on to the ground, but the stones pulled loose under his hands, the sandy soil broke free as his nails dragged furrows in his

wake. 'Find someone else!' His shriek echoed, as if launched directly at the temple, in through the gaping entrance, and echoing within – trapped, stolen away, rebounding until it was no longer his own voice, but that of the temple itself – a mournful cry of dying, of desperate defiance. The temple, voicing its thirst.

And something shook the sky then. Lightning without fire, thunder without sound – an arrival, jarring loose the world.

The entire temple heaved sideways, clouds of dust gasping out from between mortarless joins. It was moments from collapse—

*'No!'* bellowed the figure at the top of the stairs, even as he staggered to regain his balance. *'This one is mine! My T'orrud Segul! Look at these dead – they must be saved, delivered, they must be—'*

And now another voice sounded, behind Udinaas, high, distant, a voice of the sky itself. 'No, Errant. These dead are Forkrul Assail. Dead by your own hand. You cannot kill them to save them—'

*'Dread witch, you know nothing! They're the only ones I can save!'*

'The curse of Elder Gods – look at the blood on your hands. It is all of your own making. All of it.'

A huge shadow swept over Udinaas then. Wheeled round.

Wind gusting, tossing tangled black hair upward from corpses, buffeting the torn fragments of their clothes; then, a sudden pressure, as of vast weight descending, and the dragon was there – between Udinaas and the Errant – long hind limbs stretching downward, claws plunging through cold bodies, crushing them in the snapping of bones as the enormous creature settled on the slope. Sinuous neck curling round, the huge head drawing closer to Udinaas, eyes of white fire.

Its voice filled his skull. 'Do you know me?'

Argent flames rippling along the golden scales, a presence exuding incandescent heat – Forkrul Assail bodies blackened beneath her, skin

crinkling, peeling back. Fats melting, popping from sudden blisters, weeping from joints.

Udinaas nodded. 'Menandore. Sister Dawn. Rapist.'

Thick, liquid laughter. The head swung away, angled up towards the Errant. 'This one is mine,' she said. 'I claimed him long ago.'

*'Claim what you like, Menandore. Before we are done here, you will give him to me. Of your own will.'*

'Indeed?'

*'As . . . payment.'*

'For what?'

*'For news of your sisters.'*

She laughed again. 'Do you imagine I don't know?'

'*But I offer more*.' The god raised his red hands. '*I can ensure they are removed from your path, Menandore. A simple . . . nudge.*'

The dragon shifted round, regarded Udinaas once more. 'For this one?'

'*Yes*.'

'Very well, you can have him. But not our child.'

It was the Errant's turn to laugh. *'When last did you visit that . . . child, Menandore?'*

'What does that mean?'

*'Only this. He is grown now. His mind is his own. Not yours, Menandore. You are warned, and this time I demand nothing in return. Elder Gods, my dear, can on occasion know mercy.'*

She snorted – a gust of raw power. 'I have heard that. Fine propaganda, the morsel you feed to your starving, pathetic worshippers. This man, this father of my child, he will fail you. T'orrud Segul. He has no faith. The compassion within him is like a meer-rat in a pit of lions – dancing faster

than you can see, ever but moments from annihilation. He has played with it for a long time, Errant. You will not catch it, cannot claim it, cannot bind it to your cause.' She voiced her cruel laughter once more. 'I took more from him than you realize.'

*Including, bitch, my fear of you.* 'You think you can give me away, Menandore?'

The eyes flared with amusement or contempt or both. 'Speak then, Udinaas, let us hear your bold claims.'

'You both think you summoned me here, don't you? For your stupid tug of war. But the truth is, I summoned the two of you.'

'You are mad—'

'Maybe so, Menandore. *But this is my dream.* Not yours. Not his. *Mine*.'

'You fool,' she spat. 'Just try banishing us—'

Udinaas opened his eyes, stared up at a cold, clear night sky, and allowed himself a smile. *My dream, your nightmare.* He pulled the furs tighter about himself, drawing up his legs – making sure they weren't broken. Stiffness in the knees – normal, what came of scrabbling over rock and ice – but warm with life. 'All is well,' he whispered.

'Good,' said Kettle.

Udinaas turned, looked up. She was crouched at his side. 'Why are you awake?' he demanded.

'I'm not. And neither are you. That temple, it fell over. After you left.'

'Hope it crushed the Errant flat, then.'

'No. You'd already sent him away. Her too.'

'But not you.'

'No. You didn't know I was there.'

'All right, so I am still dreaming. What do you want?'

'That temple. It couldn't have held all those souls. All that grief. It was broken and that's why it fell over. That was what you were supposed to see. So you'd understand when everything happens. And not be sad. And be able to do what he wants you to do, just not in the way he thought it would be. That's all.'

'Good. Now crawl back to your own dreams, Kettle.'

'Okay. Just remember, don't cry too soon. You have to wait.'

'Really. How long before I do this crying?'

But she was gone.

He'd caught some damn fever from the rotting ice. Shivering and hallucinating for three – maybe four – nights now. Bizarre dreams inside dreams and on and on. Delusions of warmth, the comfort of furs not sodden with sweat, the balm of mysterious conversations where meaning wasn't an issue. *I like this life. It's predictable. Mostly. And when it isn't, it feels no different. I take whatever comes at me. As if each night I receive lessons in . . . in taking control.*

Now it was time for the huge table heaped with all his favourite foods.

They said he was gaunt as a wraith.

But every night he ate his fill.

With the dawn light pushing the shadows into the clefts and valleys and transforming the snow-clad peaks into molten gold, Seren Pedac rose from her furs and stood, feeling grimy and dishevelled. The high altitude left her throat sore and her eyes dry, and her allergies only exasperated those conditions. Shivering in the cutting wind, she watched Fear Sengar struggling to relight the fire. Long-frozen wood was reluctant to burn. Kettle had been gathering grasses and she now squatted down beside the Tiste Edur with her offerings.

A ragged cough from where Udinaas lay still buried in furs. After a moment, he slowly sat up. Face flushed with fever, sweat on his brow, his eyes dull. He hacked out a noise Seren belatedly realized was laughter.

Fear's head snapped round as if wasp-stung. 'This amuses you? You'd rather another cold meal to start the day?'

Udinaas blinked over at the Tiste Edur, then shrugged and looked away.

Seren cleared her throat. 'Whatever amused him, Fear, had nothing to do with you.'

'Speaking for me now?' Udinaas asked her. He tottered weakly to his feet, still wrapped in the furs. 'This might be another dream,' he said. 'At any moment that white-skinned warrior perched over there might transform into a dragon. And the child Kettle will open her mouth like a door, into which Fear Sengar will plunge, devoured by his own hunger to betray.' The flat, murky eyes fixed on Seren Pedac. 'And you will conjure lost ages, Acquitor, as if the follies of history had any relevance, any at all.'

The whirl and snap of a chain punctuated the bizarre pronouncements.

Udinaas glanced over at Clip, and smiled. 'And you're dreaming of sinking your hands into a pool of blood, but not any old blood. The question is, can you manipulate events to achieve that red torrent?'

'Your fever has boiled your brain,' the Tiste Andii warrior said with an answering smile. He faced Silchas Ruin. 'Kill him or leave him behind.'

Seren Pedac sighed, then said, 'Clip, when will we begin our descent? Lower down, there will be herbs to defeat his fever.'

'Not for days,' he replied, spinning the chain in his right hand. 'And even then . . . well, I doubt you'll find what you're looking for. Besides,' he added, 'what ails him isn't entirely natural.'

Silchas Ruin, facing the trail they would climb this day, said, 'He speaks true. Old sorcery fills this fetid air.'

'What kind?' Seren asked.

'It is fragmented. Perhaps . . . K'Chain Che'Malle – they rarely used their magic in ways easily understood. Never in battle. I do recall something . . . necromantic.'

'And is that what this is?'

'I cannot say, Acquitor.'

'So why is Udinaas the one afflicted? What about the rest of us?'

No-one ventured a response, barring another broken laugh from Udinaas.

Rings clacked. 'I have made my suggestion,' Clip said.

Again, the conversation seemed to die. Kettle walked over to stand close to Udinaas, as if conferring protection.

The small campfire was finally alight, if feebly so. Seren collected a tin pot and set out to find some clean snow, which should have been a simple enough task. But the rotted patches were foul with detritus. Smears of decaying vegetation, speckled layers of charcoal and ash, the carcasses of some kind of ice-dwelling worm or beetle, wood and pieces of countless animals. Hardly palatable. She was surprised they weren't all sick.

She halted before a long, narrow stretch of ice-crusted snow that filled a crack or fold in the rock. She drew her knife, knelt down and began pecking at it. Chunks broke away. She examined each one, discarding those too discoloured with filth, setting the others into the pot. Not much like normal glaciers – those few she had seen up close. After all, they were made of successive snowfalls as much as creeping ice. Those snowfalls normally produced relatively pristine strata. But here, it was as if the air through which the snow fell had been thick with drifting refuse, clogging every descending flake. *Air thick with smoke, ash, pieces of once living things. What could have done that?* If just ash then she could interpret it as the result of some volcanic eruption. *But not damned fragments of skin and meat. What secret hides in these mountains?*

She managed to dig the knife-point deep into the ice, then settled her weight on it. The entire remaining slab of ice lifted suddenly, prised away from the crack. And there, lying beneath it, a spear.

The shaft, long as Seren was tall, was not wood. Polished, mottled amber and brown, it looked almost . . . scaled. The broad head was of one piece,

blade and stem, ground jade, milky smooth and leaf-shaped. No obvious glue or binding held the socket onto the shaft.

She pulled the weapon loose. The scaled texture, she saw, was created by successive, intricate layering of horn, which explained the mottled appearance. Again, she could discern no indication of how the layers were fixed. The spear was surprisingly heavy, as if the shaft had mineralized.

A voice spoke behind her. 'Now that is an interesting find.'

She turned, studied Clip's mocking expression, and felt a flash of irritation. 'In the habit of following people around, Clip?'

'No, mostly I lead them. I know, that task serves to push you to one side. Leaves you feeling useless.'

'Any other bright observations you want to make?'

He shrugged, spinning the damned chain back and forth. 'That spear you found. It's T'lan Imass.'

'Is that supposed to mean something to me?'

'It will.'

'It's not a weapon *you* fight with, is it?'

'No. And I don't hide in trees and throw fruit either.'

She frowned.

He laughed, turning away. 'I was born in Darkness, Acquitor.'

'And?'

He paused, glanced back at her. 'Why do you think I am the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord? My good looks? My charming personality? My skill with these blades here?'

'Well,' she replied, 'you've just exhausted my list of reasons.'

'Ha ha. Hear me. Born in Darkness. Blessed by our Mother. The first in thousands of years – she turned away, you know. From her chosen sons.

Thousands of years? More like tens of thousands. But not from me. I can *walk* the Darkness, Acquitor.' He waved his chain-spinning hand back towards the others. 'Not even Silchas Ruin can make that claim.'

'Does he know?'

'No. This is our secret for as long as you choose.'

'And why would I choose to not tell him this, Clip?'

'Because I am the only one here who can keep him from killing you. You and Udinaas – the two he considers most useless. Indeed, potential enemies.'

'Enemies? Why would he think that?' She shook her head in disbelief. 'We're just bugs he can crush underfoot any time he likes. An enemy is one who poses a threat. We don't.'

'Well, on that count, I see no need to enlighten you. Yet.'

Snorting, she turned and collected the pot with its chunks of glittering ice.

'Plan on keeping your find?' Clip asked.

She looked down at the weapon in her right hand. 'Udinaas can use it as a crutch.'

Clip's laugh was bitterly cruel. 'Oh, the injustice, Acquitor. For a storied weapon such as that one.'

She frowned at him. 'You speak as if you recognise it. Do you?'

'Let's just say it belongs with us.'

Frustrated, she moved past him, back towards the camp.

The spear drew attention, frighteningly fast from Silchas Ruin, who – before he spun round to face her – seemed to flinch. Udinaas, too – his head snapping up as she walked towards him. She felt her heart lurch in her chest and was suddenly afraid.

She sought to hide it by holding stubbornly to her original thought. 'Udinaas, I found this – you can use it to keep your balance.'

He grunted, then nodded. 'A ground-stone tip – can't have much of an edge, can it? At least I won't stumble and poke my eye out, unless I work hard at it, and why would I do that?'

'Do not mock it,' Silchas Ruin said. 'Use it in the manner the Acquitor has suggested, by all means. But know that it is not yours. You will have to surrender it – know that, Udinaas.'

'Surrender it – to you, perchance?'

Again the flinch. 'No.' And Silchas Ruin turned away once more.

Udinaas grinned weakly at Seren. 'Have you just given me a cursed weapon, Acquitor?'

'I don't know.'

He leaned on it. 'Well, never mind. I've a whole collection of curses – one more won't make much difference.'

Ice was melted, waterskins refilled. Another pot of frozen snow provided the water for a broth of herbs, rinds of myrid fat, berries and nuggets of sap taken from maple trees – the last of which they had seen ten days ago, at an elevation where the air was invigorating and sweetly pungent with life. Here, there were no trees. Not even shrubs. The vast forest surrounding them was barely ankle high – a tangled world of lichen and mosses.

Holding a bowl of the soup in trembling hands, Udinaas spoke to Seren. 'So, just to get things straight in this epic farce of ours, did you find this spear or did it find you?'

She shook her head. 'No matter. It's yours now.'

'No. Silchas is right. You've but loaned it to me, Acquitor. It slides like grease in my hands. I couldn't use it to fight – even if I knew how, which I don't.'

'Not hard,' Clip said. 'Just don't hold it at the sharp end and poke people with it until they fall over. I've yet to face a warrior with a spear I couldn't cut to pieces.'

Fear Sengar snorted.

And Seren knew why. It was enough to brighten this morning, enough to bring a wry smile to her lips.

Clip noted it and sneered, but said nothing.

'Pack up,' Silchas Ruin said after a moment. 'I weary of waiting.'

'I keep telling you,' Clip said, spinning the rings once more, 'it'll all come in its own time, Silchas Ruin.'

Seren turned to face the rearing peaks to the north. The gold had paled, as if drained of all life, all wonder. Another day of weary travel awaited them. Her mood plunged and she sighed.

Given the choice, this game should have been his own. Not Cotillion's, not Shadowthrone's. But enough details had drifted down to Ben Adaephon Delat, heavy and grim as the ash from a forest fire, to make him content, for the moment, to choke on someone else's problems. Since the Enfilade at Pale, his life had been rather headlong. He felt as if he was plunging down a steep hill, for ever but one step from bone-snapping, blood-spraying disaster.

Used to be he thrived on such feelings. Proof that he was alive.

Yet . . . too many friends had fallen to the wayside on the journey. Far too many, and he was reluctant to let others take their places – not even this humble Tiste Edur with his too-full heart, his raw wound of grief; nor that damned T'lan Imass who now waded through a turgid sea of memories, as if seeking one – *just one* – that did not sob with futility. The wrong company indeed for Quick Ben – they were such open invitations to friendship. Not pity – which would have been easier. No, their damned *nobility* demolished that possibility.

And look where all his friends had gone. Whiskeyjack, Hedge, Trotts, Dujek Onearm, Kalam . . . well, wasn't it always the way, that the pain of loss so easily overwhelmed the . . . *the not-yet-lost*? And that sad list was only the most recent version. All since Pale. What of all the others, from long ago? *Us damned survivors don't have it easy. Not even close.*

The thought made him sneer inside. What was this feeling sorry for himself? Pathetic indulgence and nothing else.

Skirting the edge of a submerged ravine, they sloshed through tepid, waist-deep water, their passage swirling up clouds of silts that had rested lightly on some unseen, interminably paved lake-bottom. Tracked now by some kind of fish, their humped backs appearing every now and then to one side or the other, the dorsal fin ribbed, the bulge of water hinting at sizes a little too large for restful contemplation.

Least pleasant of all, Trull Sengar's comment only moments past that these fish were probably the same kind that had once tried to eat him.

And Onrack the Broken had replied, 'Yes, they are the same as the ones we fought on the floodwall, although of course they were then in their land-dwelling stage of life.'

'So why are they here?' Trull then asked.

'Hungry,' Onrack answered.

Enough, right then and there, to stir Quick Ben from his morose taciturnity. 'Listen to you two! We're about to be attacked by giant wizard-eating fish and you're reminiscing! Look, are we in real danger or what?'

Onrack's robust, prognathous face swung to regard him for a moment, then the T'lan Imass said, 'We were assuming that you were warding us from them, Quick Ben.'

'Me?' He looked about, seeking any sign of dry land – but the milky water stretched on and on.

'Is it time, then, to make use of your gate?'

Quick Ben licked his lips. 'I think so. I mean, I've recovered from the last time, more or less. And I found somewhere to go. It's just . . .'

Trull Sengar leaned on his spear. 'You came out of that magical journey, Quick Ben, wearing the grin of the condemned. If indeed our destination is as fraught as it must be, I can understand your reluctance. Also, having observed you for some time now, it is clear to me that your battle against

Icarium has weakened you at some fundamental level – perhaps you fear you will not be able to fashion a gate durable enough to permit the passage of all three of us? If so—'

'Wait,' the wizard interjected, silently cursing. 'All right, I am a little . . . fragile. Ever since Icarium. You see far too much, Trull Sengar. But I can take us all through. That's a promise. It's just . . .' He glanced over at Onrack. 'Well, there may be some . . . unanticipated, uh, developments.'

Onrack spoke, 'I am at risk?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe.'

'This should not unduly affect your decision,' the T'lan Imass replied. 'I am expendable. These fish cannot eat me, after all.'

'If we leave,' Quick Ben said, 'you will be trapped here for ever.'

'No. I will abandon this form. I will join oblivion in these waters.'

'Onrack—' Trull began in clear alarm.

But Quick Ben cut in, 'You're coming with us, Onrack. I'm just saying there's a little uncertainty with what will happen to you. I can't explain more. It just relates to where we will find ourselves. To the aspect of that realm, I mean.'

Trull Sengar snorted. 'Sometimes,' he said with a wry smile, 'you are truly hopeless, wizard. Best open the gate now, before we end up in the belly of a fish.' He then pointed behind Quick Ben. 'That one looks to be the biggest yet – see the others scatter – and it's coming straight for us.'

Turning, the wizard's eyes widened.

The waist-deep water did not even reach its eyes, and the monstrous fish was simply bulling its way through the shallows. A damned catfish of some sort, longer than a Napan galley—

Quick Ben raised his arms and shouted in a loud, oddly high-pitched voice: 'It's time to leave!'

*Fragile. Oh yes, there is that. I poured too much through me trying to beat him back. There's only so much mortal flesh and bone can take. The oldest rule of all, for Hood's sake.*

He forced open the gate, heard the explosive plunge of water into the realm beyond – the current wrapping round his legs – and he lunged forward, shouting, 'Follow me!'

Once again, that nauseating, dreadful moment of suffocation, then he was staggering through a stream, water splashing out on all sides, rushing away – and cold wintry air closed in amidst clouds of vapour.

Trull Sengar stumbled past him, using the spear to right himself a moment before falling.

Gasping, Quick Ben turned.

And saw a figure emerge from the white mists.

Trull Sengar's shout of surprise startled into the air birds from a nearby swath of knee-high trees, and as they raced skyward they spun in a half-circle over the head of Onrack the Broken. At their cries, at the swarm of tiny shadows darting around him, the warrior looked up, then halted.

Quick Ben saw Onrack's chest swell with an indrawn breath that seemed without end.

The head then tilted down once more.

And the wizard stared into a face of smooth, wind-burnished skin. Eyes of green glittered beneath the heavy ridge of the brow. Twin streams of cold air then plumed down from Onrack's broad, flattened, oft-broken nose.

From Trull Sengar, 'Onrack? By the Sisters, Onrack!'

The small eyes, buried in epicanthic folds, shifted. A low, reverberating voice rumbled from the flesh and blood warrior. 'Trull Sengar. Is this . . . is this mortality?'

The Tiste Edur drew a step closer. 'You don't remember? How it feels to be alive?'

'I – I . . . yes.' A sudden look of wonder in that heavy, broadly featured face. 'Yes.' Another deep breath, then a gust that was nearly savage in its exultation. The strange gaze fixed on Quick Ben once more. 'Wizard, is this illusion? Dream? A journey of my spirit?'

'I don't think so. I mean, I think it's real enough.'

'Then . . . this realm. It is Tellann.'

'Maybe. I'm not sure.'

Trull Sengar was suddenly on his knees, and Quick Ben saw tears streaming down the Tiste Edur's lean, dusky face.

The burly, muscled warrior before them, still wearing the rotted remnants of fur, slowly looked round at the withered landscape of open tundra. 'Tellann,' he whispered. '*Tellann.*'

'When the world was young,' Redmask began, 'these plains surrounding us were higher, closer to the sky. The earth was as a thin hide, covering thick flesh that was nothing but frozen wood and leaves. The rotted corpse of ancient forests. Beneath summer sun, unseen rivers flowed through that forest, between every twig, every crushed-down branch. And with each summer, the sun's heat was greater, the season longer, and the rivers flowed, draining the vast buried forest. And so the plains descended, settled as the dried-out forest crumbled to dust, and with the rains more water would sink down, sweeping away that dust, southward, northward, eastward, westward, following valleys, rising to join streams. All directions, ever flowing away.'

Masarch sat silent with the other warriors – a score or more now, gathering to hear the ancient tale. None, however – Masarch included – had heard it told in quite this way, the words emerging from the red-scaled mask – from a warrior who rarely spoke yet who spoke now with ease, matching the cadence of elders with perfect precision.

The K'Chain Che'Malle stood nearby, hulking and motionless like a pair of grotesque statues. Yet Masarch imagined that they were listening, even as he and his companions were.

'The land left the sky. The land settled onto stone, the very bone of the world. In this manner, the land changed to echo the cursed sorceries of the Shamans of the Antlers, the ones who kneel among boulders, the worshippers of stone, the weapon-makers.' He paused, then said, 'This was no accident. What I have just described is but one truth. There is another.' A longer hesitation, then a long, drawn-out sigh. 'Shamans of the Antlers, gnarled as tree roots, those few left, those few still haunting our dreams even as they haunt this ancient plain. They hide in cracks in the world's bone. Sometimes their bodies are all but gone, until only their withered faces stare out from those cracks, challenging eternity as befits their terrible curse.'

Masarch was not alone in shivering in the pre-dawn chill, at the images Redmask's words conjured. Every child knew of those twisted, malevolent spirits, the husks of shamans long, long dead, yet unable to truly die. Rolling stones into strange patterns beneath star-strewn night skies, chewing with their teeth the faces of boulders to make frightening scenes that only appeared at dusk or dawn, when the sun's light was newborn or fading into death – and far more often the boulders were so angled that it was at the moments of dusk that the deep magic was awakened, the images rising into being from what had seemed random pecules in the stone. Magic to murder the wind in that place—

'In the time before the plains descended, the shamans and their dread followers made music at the sun's dying, on the night of its shortest passage, and at other holy times before the snows came. They did not use skin drums. There was no need. No, they used the hide of the earth, the buried forest beneath. They pounded the skin of the world until every beast of the plain trembled, until the bhederin burst into motion, tens of thousands as one, and ran wild through the night – and so they too echoed the music of the Shamans of the Antlers, feeding their dark power.

'But the land fell away in the end – in grasping eternity, the shamans slew the very earth itself. This curse is without rest. This curse would close about our necks – each and every one of us here – this very night, if it could.'

Redmask was silent for a time then, as if allowing the terror to run free through the hearts of his audience. Eventually he resumed. 'The Shamans of the Antlers gathered their deathless warriors then, and set out to wage war. Abandoning this plain – and from that time, only those who fell in battle were returned here. Broken pieces. Failed and withered as the plain itself, never again to reach or even look skyward. Such was their curse.

'We do not forgive. It is not in us to forgive. But nor will we forget.

'Bast Fulmar, the Valley of Drums. The Letherii believe we hold it in great awe. They believe this valley was the site of an ancient war between the Awl and the K'Chain Che'Malle – although the Letherii know not the true name of our ancient enemy. Perhaps indeed there were skirmishes, such that memory survives, only to twist and bind anew in false shapes. Many of you hold to those new shapes, believing them true. An ancient battle. One we won. One we lost – there are elders who are bold with the latter secret, as if defeat was a knife hidden in their heart-hand.' Redmask shrugged at the notion, dismissing it. Pale light was creeping close. Birdsong rose from the low shrubs.

'Bast Fulmar,' Redmask said again. 'Valley of Drums. Here, then, is its secret truth. The Shamans of the Antlers drummed the hide of this valley before us. Until all life was stolen, all the waters fled. They drank deep, until nothing was left. For at this time, the shamans were not alone, not for that fell ritual. No, others of their kind had joined them – on distant continents, hundreds, thousands of leagues away, each and all on that one night. To sever their life from the earth, to sever this earth from its own life.'

Silence, then, not a single warrior even so much as drawing breath. Held – too long—

Redmask released them with another sigh. 'Bast Fulmar. We rise now to make war. In the Valley of Drums, my warriors, Letherii sorcery *will fail.* Edur sorcery *will fail*. In Bast Fulmar, there is no water of magic, no stream of power from which to steal. All used up, all taken to quench the fire that is life. Our enemy is not aware. They will find the truth this day. Too late. Today, my warriors, shall be iron against iron. That and nothing more.'

Redmask then rose. 'Release the truth – to every warrior. Then make ready. We march to battle. To victory.'

Courage surged through Masarch's chest, and he found he was on his feet, trembling, and now moving off into the fading gloom, whispering his words to all that he passed. Again and again.

*'Bast Fulmar sings this day. It sings: there is no magic. There is no magic!'*

Stablers gathering the horses and leading them across the courtyard behind her, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis left the reins of her mount in the hands of an aide, then strode towards the estate's squat, brooding entrance. Thirty leagues south of the port town of Rennis, Boaral Keep was the birthplace of the Grass Jackets Brigade, but that was a long century past and now some third or fourth son of a remotely related Boaral held this fortress, clinging to the antiquated noble title of Dresh-Preda, or Demesne Lord. And in his command, a garrison consisting of barely a dozen soldiers, at least two of whom – at the outer gate – were drunk.

Weary, saddlesore, and feeling decidedly short on patience, Yan Tovis ascended the four broad, shallow steps to the lintel-capped main doors. No guard in sight. She wrenched the latch clear, then kicked open the heavy door and marched into the gloomy foyer within, startling two old women with buckets and khalit vine mops.

They flinched back, eyes down, hastily genuflecting.

'Where is Dresh Boaral?' Twilight demanded as she tugged free her gauntlets.

The hags exchanged glances, then one attempted something like a curtsy before saying, 'Ma'am, he be well sleeping it off, aye. An' us, we be well cleaning up his supper.'

A muffled snort from the other servant.

Only now did Yan Tovis detect the acrid smell of bile beneath that of lye soap. 'Where then is the Master at Arms?'

'Ma'am,' another curtsy, then, 'he be ridin' off wi' four soljers, west as they say, t'reach the coast fast as a clam squirt, an' that's a cloud ain't e'en settled yet.'

'He left recently then? What was the reason? And how far is the coast from here?'

'Ma'am, would be unner a bell, fast-goin' as he was.'

'And the reason?'

Another mysterious exchange of glances, then, 'Ma'am, coast be well black an' whispery of late. Got fishers vanishin' an' demon eyes flashin' from the deeps. Got islands be well ice an' all, pale an' deathly as the innards of a murderer's skull.'

'The Master at Arms rode off after superstitious rumours?'

'Ma'am, I be well 'ave a cousin on the shore—'

'The ditsy one, aye,' interjected the other hag.

'Be well ditsy but that don't matter in this, in this being the voices of the sea, which she heard an' heard more'n once too. Voices, ma'am, like the ghosts of the drowned as she says, havin' heard them an' heard them more'n once too.'

Two of her sergeants were now behind the Atri-Preda, listening. Twilight loosened the strap on her helm. 'This Master stays sober?' she asked.

'One a them hast, be well an' all.'

'It be him,' the other agreed. 'An' that a curse what make us worse at bad times of the night like now—'

'Shush you! This ma'am be a soljer outrankin' Dresh himself !'

'You don't know that, Pully! Why—'

'But I do! Whose nephew dug latrines for the Grass Jackets, be well he did! It's ranks an' neck torcs an' the cut of the cape an' all—'

Yan Tovis turned to one of her sergeants. 'Are there fresh horses in the stables?'

A nod. 'Four, Atri-Preda.'

The first old woman pushed at the other at that and said, 'Tolya! Be well I did!'

Yan Tovis tilted her head back in an effort to loosen the muscles of her neck. She closed her eyes for a moment, then sighed. 'Saddle them up, Sergeant. Pick me three of the least exhausted riders. I am off to find our missing Master at Arms.'

'Sir.' The man saluted and departed.

Turning back to the old women, the Atri-Preda asked, 'Where is the nearest detachment of Tiste Edur?'

A half-dozen heartbeats of non-verbal communication between the two hags, then the first one nodded and said, 'Rennis, ma'am. An' they be well not once visited neither.'

'Be glad they haven't,' Twilight said. 'They would have separated Boaral's head from his shoulders.'

The second woman snorted. 'Not so's he'd notice—'

'Shush!' scolded the first one. Then, to Twilight, 'Ma'am, Dresh Boaral, he lost mostly alla his kin when the Edur come down. Lost his wife, too, in Noose Bog, what, now be well three years—'

The other hag spat onto the floor they had just cleaned. 'Lost? Be well strangled and dumped, Pully, by his master himself! So now he drowns on his own drinkin'! But oh she was fire wasn't she – no time for mewlin' husbands only he likes his mewlin' and be well likes it enough to murder his own wife!'

Twilight said to the sergeant who had remained, 'We will stay for a few days. I want the Dresh here under house arrest. Send a rider to Rennis to request adjudication by the Tiste Edur. The investigation will involve some sorcery, specifically speaking with the dead.'

The sergeant saluted and left.

'Best be well not speak wi' the mistress, ma'am.'

Twilight frowned at the woman. 'Why not?'

'Liable she is t'start talkin' and ne'er stop. Master drunk an' she's fire, all fire – she's a might claw his eyes out, be well an' that.'

'Are you two witches?'

More silent communication between the two hags, then the first one edged one knobby, hairy foot forward and carefully wiped at the gobbet of spit on the pavestones. The toes, Twilight saw, were taloned.

'You are Shake? Shoulderwomen of the Old Ways?'

Wrinkled brows rose, then the one named Pully curtsied again. 'Local born you be well as we'd known, aye. It's there, ma'am, you're a child of the shore an' ain't you gone far, but not so far as to f 'get. Mistress ne'er liked us much.'

'So who strangled her and dumped her corpse in Noose Bog, Pully?'

The other seemed to choke, then she said, 'Dresh give 'is orders plain as web on a trail, didn't he, Pully? Give 'is orders an' wi' us we be well here since the Keep's first black stone was laid. Loyal, aye. Boaral blood was Letherii blood, the first t'these lands, the first masters a'all. Dresh the First give us 'is blood in full knowing, t'blacken the Black Stone.'

'The first Dresh here found you and forced your blessing?'

A cackle from the second woman. 'What he be well think were blessing!'

Twilight looked away, then stepped to one side and leaned a shoulder against the grimy wall. She was too tired for this. Boaral line cursed by Shake witches – who remained, alive and watchful, through generation after generation. She closed her eyes. 'Pully, how many wives have you two murdered?'

'None wi'out Dresh's command, ma'am.'

'But your curse drives them mad, every one of them.

Don't make me ask the question again.'

'Ma'am, be well twenty and one. Once their bearin' days are done. Mostly.'

'And you have been working hard at keeping the Tiste Edur away.'

'No business a theirs, ma'am.'

*Nor mine. Yet . . . not entirely true, is it?* 'End the curse, Pully. You've done enough.'

'Boaral killed more Shake than any other Dresh, ma'am. You know that.'

'End it,' Twilight said, opening her eyes and facing the two women, 'or your heads will be in sacks and buried deep in Noose Bog before this night is out.'

Pully and her companion grinned at each other.

'I am of the shore,' Yan Tovis said in a hard voice. 'My Shake name is Twilight.'

The hags suddenly backed away, then sank down onto their knees, heads bowed.

'End the curse,' Twilight said again. 'Will you defy a princess of the Last Blood?'

'Princess no longer,' Pully said to the floor.

Yan Tovis felt the blood drain from her face – if not for the wall she leaned against she would have staggered.

'Your mother died be well a year past,' Pully said in a soft, sad voice.

The other witch added, 'Crossin' from the Isle, the boat overturning. They say it was some demon o' the deep, pushed too close by dark magic out at sea – the same magic, my Queen, as could be well squirted Master at Arms west as they say. A demon, up unner the boat, an' all drowned. Whisperin' from the waters, my Queen, dark and well nigh black.'

Yan Tovis drew a deep breath. To be Shake was to know grief. Her mother was dead, now a face emptied of life. Well, she had not seen the woman in over a decade, had she? So, why this pain? *Because there is something else.* 'What is the name of the Master at Arms, Pully?'

'Yedan Derryg, Highness. The Watch.'

*The half-brother I have never met. The one who ran – from his blood, from everything. Ran nearly as far as I did.* And yet, was that old tale even true? The Watch was here, after all, a mere bell's ride from the shore. She understood now why he had ridden out on this night. *Something else, and this is it.*

Yan Tovis drew her cloak about herself, began pulling on her gauntlets. 'Feed well my soldiers. I will return with Derryg by dawn.' As she turned to the door she paused. 'The madness afflicting the Dresh, Pully.'

Behind her the witch replied, 'Be well too late for him, Highness. But we will scour the Black Stone this night. Before the Edur arrive.'

*Oh, yes, I sent for them, didn't I?* 'I imagine,' she said, her gaze fixed on the door, 'the summary execution of Dresh Boaral will be something of a mercy for the poor man.'

'You mean to do it before the Edur come here as they say, Highness?'

'Yes, Pully. He will die, I suppose, trying to flee arrest.' After a moment, she asked, 'Pully, how many shoulderwomen are left?'

'More than two hundred, Highness.'

'I see.'

'My Queen,' ventured the other, 'word will be sent out, cob to web as they say, before the sun's rise. You have been chosen a betrothed.'

'I have, have I? Who?'

'Shake Brullyg, of the Isle.'

'And does my betrothed remain on Second Maiden Fort?'

'We think so, Highness,' Pully replied.

At that she turned round. 'You don't know?'

'The web's been snapped, Highness. Almost a month now. Ice an' dark and whisperings, we cannot reach across the waves. The shore is blind to the sea, Highness.'

*The shore is blind to the sea.* 'Has such a thing ever occurred before?'

Both witches shook their heads.

Twilight swung about and hastened outside. Her riders awaited her, already mounted, silent with fatigue. She strode to the horse bearing her saddle – a chestnut gelding, the fittest of the lot, she could see in the torchlight – and pulled herself onto its broad back.

'Atri-Preda?'

'To the coast,' she said, gathering the reins. 'At the canter.'

'What's wrong with them?'

The Hound Master's face was ravaged with distress, tears streaming down his wind-burned cheeks and glistening like sweat in his beard. 'They've been poisoned, Atri-Preda! Poisoned meat, left on the ground – I'm going to lose them all!'

Bivatt cursed under her breath, then said, 'Then we shall have to do without.'

'But the Edur mages—'

'If our own cannot treat them, Bellict, then neither can the warlocks – the Edur tribes do not breed dogs for war, do they? I am sorry. Leave me now.'

Just one more unpleasant surprise to greet this dawn. Her army had marched through the last two bells of night to reach the valley – she wanted to be the first to array her troops for the battle to come, to force Redmask to react rather than initiate. Given the location of the Awl encampment, she had not felt rushed in conducting that march, anticipating it would be

midday at the earliest before the savages appeared on the east side of Bast Fulmar, thus negating any advantage of a bright morning sun at their backs.

But that enemy encampment had been a deceit.

Less than a half-league from the valley, scouts had returned to the column to report enemy in strength at Bast Fulmar.

How had her mages not found them? They had no answer, barring a disquieting fear in their eyes. Even Brohl Handar's Den-Ratha K'risnan and his four warlocks had been at a loss to explain the success of Redmask's deception. The news had left the sour taste of self-recrimination in Bivatt – relying upon mages had been a mistake, laziness leaning heavy on past successes. Outriding scouts would have discovered the ruse days ago, had she bothered to send them beyond line of sight. Keeping them close ensured no raids or ambushes, both gambits for which the Awl were renowned. She had been following doctrine, to the letter.

*Damn this Redmask. Clearly he knows that doctrine as well as I do. And used it against us.*

Now, the battle awaiting them was imminent, and the bright dawn sun would indeed blaze into the eyes of her soldiers even as the first blood was spilled.

Rising in her stirrups, she squinted once more at the valley's far side. Mounted Awl in swirling motion, in seeming chaos, riding back and forth, lifting clouds of dust that burned gold in the morning light. Horse-archers for the most part. Tending to mass in front of one of the broader slopes to the south, on her right. A second gentle incline was situated slightly to her left, and there, shifting restlessly, were five distinct wedges of Awl warriors on foot, lining what passed for a ridge – and she could see their long spears waving like reeds on a shore. Spears, not those flimsy swords sold them by the Factor's agents. She judged around a thousand warriors per wedge formation – too disciplined even now, before the fighting began. *They should be drunk. Pounding on shields. Their shamans should be rushing about in front, down all the way to the riverbed. Showing us their backsides*

*as they defecate. Screaming curses, dancing to summon dread spirits and all the rest. Instead, this . . .*

*Well, how likely is it those wedges will survive contact with my soldiers? They are not trained to this kind of war – nor did Redmask have the time to manage anything but this thin shell of organization. I have over sixteen thousand with me. Eighteen if I include the Tiste Edur. This one army of mine outnumbers the entire Awl population of warriors – and while it looks indeed as if Redmask has gathered them all, still they are not enough.*

But he wasn't making it easy to gauge numbers. The tumultuous back and forth of the horse-archers, the clouds of dust, the truncated line of sight beyond the valley's ridge – he was keeping her blind.

Brohl Handar reined in at her side, speaking loudly to be heard over the movement of her troops and the officers bellowing orders. 'Atri-Preda, you seem to intend to hold most of your medium infantry in reserve.' He gestured behind them to punctuate his words. Then, when it was clear she would not respond, he waved ahead. 'This valley's flanks, while not steeply inclined, are ribboned with drainage channels—'

'Narrow,' she cut in. 'Not deep.'

'True, but they serve to separate the field of battle into segments nonetheless.'

She glanced across at him. 'We have three such channels on our side, and all of them on my right. They have four, one to my right, two before me and one to my left – and in that direction, north, the valley narrows.' She pointed. 'See the bluff on our side there, where the Dresh ballistae are being emplaced? It cannot be assaulted from the valley floor. That shall be our rock in the stream. And before the day is through, not simply a rock, but an anvil.'

'Provided you can hold the debouch beneath it,' the Tiste Edur observed.

'I pray to the Errant that the Awl seek to flee down that defile. It may not look deadly but I assure you, push a few thousand panicking barbarians into that chokepoint and as many will die underfoot as we ourselves slaughter.'

'So you intend to sweep down and in with your right flank, pushing the enemy on the valley floor north to that narrowing. Cannot Redmask see the same?'

'He chose this site, Overseer.'

'Suggesting he sees what you see – that this place invites a half-encirclement to funnel his warriors north – to their deaths. You said, did you not, that this Redmask is no fool. How then will he counter what you seek?'

She faced the valley once again. 'Overseer, I am afraid I do not have time for this—'

'Would not a slow placing of your forces be to our advantage, given the sun's position?'

'I believe he is ready, even now,' she replied, biting back her irritation. 'He could advance at any time – and we are not ready.'

'Then why not withdraw?'

'Because the plain behind us is level for leagues – he will have more mounted warriors than I, lighter-armoured than my Bluerose lancers, and on rested horses – they can harry us at will, Overseer. Worse, we have lost our wardogs, while from the sounds of that barking, Redmask has hundreds if not thousands of his drays and herders. Your suggestion invites chaos, a messy succession of skirmishes, attacks, feints, raids—'

'Very well,' Brohl Handar interrupted. 'Atri-Preda, my K'risnan tells me this valley is dead.'

'What does he mean, *dead*?'

'Bereft of the energies one uses to create magic. It has been . . . murdered.'

'This is why none of the mages sensed the Awl army?'

Brohl Handar nodded.

*Murdered? By Redmask? Never mind.* 'Did you ask your K'risnan about the impending battle? Will he be able to use sorcery?'

'No. Nor can your mages. As he said, there will be no magic here. In this valley. That is why I again advise we withdraw. Even on the plain, exposed as you say we are, at least we will have sorcery.'

Bivatt was silent, considering. She had already known her mages would be ineffective in the valley below, although they could not explain why it was so. That the Edur warlocks had found the reason confirmed that spirit magic was involved. After a long moment, she swore and shook her head. 'We still outnumber them, with better-disciplined, better-armoured troops. Iron to iron, we will crush the Awl today. An end to this war, Overseer. Did you not counsel a quick, succinct campaign?'

'I did. But I am uneasy, Atri-Preda—'

'A battle awaits – we are all uneasy.'

'Not in that way.'

Bivatt grimaced. 'Retain your warriors, Overseer, midway between our baggage camp and my reserve units – those medium infantry, by the way, are arrayed into discrete platoons of five hundred at the minimum, and each one protects one of my mages. *They* are not in the valley.'

'Thus, if you are forced to retreat—'

'We will be positioned to blunt the pursuit with sorcery, yes.'

'Is this your plan? A feigned retreat, Atri-Preda?'

'One of them, but I do not believe it will be necessary.'

Brohl Handar studied her for a long moment, then he gathered his reins and swung his horse round. 'I will reposition my warriors, then.'

As he rode away, signal horns were sounding from various locations along the western side of the valley as units announced they were in place and at the ready. Bivatt rose once more on her stirrups and scanned her lines.

This section of the valley certainly invited a horned advance – the west edge curved, marking what had once been a broad bend in the course of the

long-dead river. The enemy's side was more undulating, bulging in the centre. The widest approach for the Awl was to her right. To counter that she had set three legions of the Crimson Rampant Brigade in shield-wall formation at the top of the slope, fifteen hundred medium infantry, flanked on the nearer inside by five hundred heavies of the Harridict Brigade. To the furthest right and already edging down into the valley were a thousand skirmishing light infantry of the Crimson Rampant. Inside of the heavies another fifteen hundred skirmishers, these of the Artisan Battalion, were likewise slowly, raggedly, working their way down. The foot soldiers on this side screened three wings of Bluerose cavalry: fifteen hundred lancers who would, when she gave the signal, sweep down between the south skirmishers and the Crimson Rampant shield-wall to begin the hard push of the enemy northward along the floor of the valley, even as that shield-wall advanced towards the riverbed.

On her immediate right, at a modest bulge in the ridge line, the Atri-Preda had positioned the Drene Garrison – fifteen hundred medium infantry – looking down on an approach narrowed by two drainage channels. Directly in front of her waited the conjoined wedges of a thousand heavy infantry of the Merchants' Battalion – a sawtooth formation that she would advance down then swing either right or left, depending on the state of battle. Rightward was problematic in that they would have to cross a drainage channel, but they would do that so early in the march down that she was not unduly concerned.

To her immediate left waited three half-legions of heavies from the Artisan Battalion, screened in front by a thousand Harridict skirmishers just beginning their move down towards the broad, flat riverbed. Just north of these units waited the Atri-Preda's mailed fist, a thousand heavies of the Crimson Rampant, again in sawtooth formation, against whom she expected Redmask to throw his main force of warriors – who were already directly opposite, still holding to their spearhead forms, five in all.

Behind this solid wall of heavy infantry waited the remaining three companies of Bluerose lancers, although this was a feint, since Bivatt intended to send them northward, round behind the ballistae knoll and down into the riverbed beyond the chokepoint.

North of the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry was another shield-wall of the brigade's medium infantry, positioned to guard the flank of the heavies to their right and the approach to the knoll to their left.

Settling back onto her saddle, Bivatt gestured and an aide hurried to her side. 'Signal the Crimson Rampant heavy to advance into the valley and halt midway between their present position and the riverbed. Confirm that the Dresh ballistae are properly sighted for enfilade.'

The runner rushed off to the block of flag signallers gathered on the raised platform behind her. Without mages they were resorting to the ancient practices of communication. Far from ideal, she admitted, and once the clouds of dust rose above the engagement . . . well, at that point such signalling often became irrelevant.

She waved another aide forward. 'Send the left flank lancers to north of the chokepoint.'

Right and left on the valley slope before her, Letherii skirmishers were reaching the flats of the riverbed, still unchallenged. The sound of masses of soldiers in motion rose in a whisper above the thunder of horse-hoofs from the other side of the valley.

On that side the clouds of sunlit dust obscured almost everything, but she noted that those clouds stretched both north and south, well beyond the battle site. *Well, one of those marks a feint, likely the north one. He knows which of my horns will strike deepest and turn.* She called out to a third message-bearer. 'Signal the right flank lancers to advance to the edge of the riverbed, widely arrayed in case the skirmishers need to withdraw in haste. Crimson Rampant mediums and the Harridict heavies to march down in their wake.'

*Let's get this damned thing started, Redmask.*

She couldn't see him. No knot of standards or banners marked his command position. No riders converging in one place then back out again.

But, finally, movement. Lightly armoured skirmishers were pelting down to meet her right advance. Slingers, shortbow archers, javelin-hurlers, round

hide shields and scimitars. The mass of horse-archers that had been riding back and forth along that ridge line was suddenly gone.

'Have the south lancers hold!' Bivatt snapped. Those Awl skirmishers were an invitation to charge, at which point her cavalry's flank would be swept by those mounted archers – and whatever lurked hidden behind them.

Light engagement now between skirmishers, directly down from the Drene Garrison. The javelins were an unexpected inclusion, and were proving bloodily effective.

The southernmost Crimson Rampant skirmishers had crossed the riverbed and were angling northward – still a thousand or more paces from contacting their Awl counterparts. Then arrows began descending in their midst – horse-archers, crowding the ridge just above its steepest bank. Hardly clouds of missiles, but enough to make those lightly armoured skirmishers flinch, then contract slightly back towards the riverbed.

Where the hand-to-hand fighting was occurring, the Artisan skirmishers – weathering the javelin strike – were now driving the Awl back.

The early morning air remained infuriatingly still – no wind at all, and the dust swirled and rolled and spread in an ever-thickening haze.

At sighting the half-thousand heavy infantry of the Harridict appear at the west edge of the riverbed, the Awl skirmishers began a wholesale retreat, many flinging away their round-shields.

*Redmask does not have their hearts. Oh, we can break them here. Hard and fast.* 'Signal the Merchants' heavies to advance and swing south!'

To her left, the only movement was from her own forces, the skirmishers of the Harridict and, just north of them, the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry – almost to the riverbed now. She squinted at the valley's opposite side. Perhaps this chaos she was seeing was evidence of Redmask's loss of control. *No, wait on this. Wait until we take the valley's south end.*

The Artisan skirmishers were seeking to maintain contact with the retreating Awl, but Bivatt could see the sergeants holding them in check,

keeping them just ahead of the advancing heavies on their right flank. *Still, throwing away their damned shields . . .*

Then, directly before her, horse-archers appeared, a narrow spear driving down the centre of the battlefield, with only skirmishers opposite them – who quickly backed up the slope at a southerly angle to draw in behind her advancing Merchants' Battalion of heavy infantry. *Is Redmask mad? That spear-point will be smashed against the heavies – this is not how cavalry charge – they're only horse-archers!*

Whereupon the mounted archers wheeled, the spear becoming a line – a thousand or more – suddenly sweeping southward.

Catching the Artisan skirmishers in the flank.

Arrows flashed.

The Letherii light infantry seemed to melt away, bodies tumbling down. Survivors ran for their lives.

That broad line of horse-archers then began a complicated, stunning manoeuvre, its tailing, easternmost end now slowing, swinging up, west, pulling to shift the line south-north, now launching sweeping arrow-fire across the front ranks of the Harridict heavy infantry, then the Crimson Rampant medium, before the head of the line swung back eastward, more missiles arcing across to the Bluerose lancers, who responded with a blare of horns, surging forward to close with the Awl.

Yet they were not interested in such an engagement. The line broke apart, as riders spurred hard back towards the east ridge.

'*Halt that charge!* ' Bivatt shouted. *Stung, we lash out – who commands that wing?*

As the lancers spread out in their hard pursuit, three wings of heavier-armed and armoured Awl horse-warriors appeared on the ridge line, then plunged down the slope to take the Bluerose companies in the flank. Three wings, outnumbering the lancers by two to one.

Bivatt watched in fury as her cavalry sought to wheel to meet the attack, whilst others responded to her command – and so lost all momentum.

'Sound the withdrawal for those lancers!'

Too late.

The Awl horse-warriors swept through scattered skirmishers of the Crimson Rampant, then slammed into the Bluerose companies.

She heard animals scream, felt the impact tremble through the ground – enough to make her mount sidestep – and then dust obscured the scene. 'Advance the heavies at the double!'

'Which heavies, Atri-Preda?'

'Harridict and Merchants', you fool! And same command for the Crimson Rampant medium! Quickly!'

She saw riders and riderless horses plunge into view from the roiling dust clouds. Her lancers had been shattered – were the Awl pursuing? *Their blood must be high – oh, let them lose control, let them meet the fists of my heavies!*

But no, there they were, rising up the far slope, waving weapons in the air to announce their triumph.

She saw the Awl skirmishers reappearing on the ridge line, in blocks with avenues in between to let the riders pass through – but those light infantry were transformed. Equipped now with rectangular, copper-sheathed shields and bearing long spears, they closed ranks after the last horse-warriors were through, and steadied their line at the very edge of the ridge.

On the valley floor, dust climbed skyward, slowly revealing the devastating effects of that flank charge into the Bluerose companies. *Errant below, they've been wiped out.* Hundreds of dead and dying skirmishers covered the grounds to either side of that fateful impact.

Her right advance had been deeply wounded – *not yet mortal, even so* – 'Advance the medium and the two heavies across the valley – order to

engage that line on the ridge. Wedge formations!' *Those skirmishers are too thinly arrayed to hold.*

'Atri-Preda!' called an aide. 'Movement to the north side!'

She cantered her horse to the very edge of the rise and scanned the scene below and to her left. 'Report!'

'Bluerose lancers in retreat, Atri-Preda – the valley floor beyond the chokepoint is theirs—'

'What? How many damned horse-archers does he have?'

The officer shook her head. 'Wardogs, sir. Close on two thousand of the damned things – moving through the high grasses in the basin – they were on the lancers before they knew it. The horses went wild, sir—'

'*Shit!* ' Then, upon seeing the messenger's widening eyes, she steeled herself. 'Very well. Move the reserve medium to the north flank of the knoll.' *Seven hundred and fifty, Merchants' Battalion – I doubt they'd try sending dogs against that. I can still advance them to retake the chokepoint's debouch, when the time comes.*

As she thought this, she was scanning the array before her. Directly opposite, the thousand Harridict skirmishers had crossed the riverbed, even as the Crimson Rampant sawtooth advance moved onto level ground.

And Redmask's five wedges of warriors were marching to meet them. *Excellent. We'll lock that engagement – with ballistae enfilade to weaken their north flank – then down come the Crimson Rampant medium, to wheel into their flank.*

Surprisingly the Awl wedges more or less held to their formations, although they were each maintaining considerable distance from their flanking neighbours – once the space drew tighter, she suspected, the wedges would start mixing, edges pulled ragged. Marching in time was the most difficult battlefield manoeuvre, after all. Between each of them, then, could be found the weak points. Perhaps enough to push through with the saw's teeth and begin isolating each wedge.

'Wardogs on the knoll!'

She spun at the cry. 'Errant's kick!' Frenzied barking, shrieks from the weapon crews – 'Second reserve legion – the Artisan! Advance on the double – butcher those damned things!'

Obscurely, she suddenly recalled a scene months ago – wounded but alive, less than a handful of the beasts on a hill overlooking an Awl camp, watching the Letherii slaughtering the last of their masters. And she wondered, with a shiver of superstitious fear, if those beasts were now exacting ferocious vengeance. *Dammit, Bivatt – never mind all that.*

The Awl spear-heads were not drawing together, she saw – nor was there need to, now that she'd temporarily lost her ballistae. Indeed, the two northernmost of those wedges were now angling to challenge her Crimson Rampant medium. But this would be old-style fighting, she knew – and the Awl did not possess the discipline nor the training for this kind of steeled butchery.

*Yet, Redmask is not waging this battle in the Awl fashion, is he? No, this is something else. He's treating this like a plains engagement in miniature – the way those horse-archers wheeled, reformed, then reformed again – a hit and run tactic, all on a compacted scale.*

*I see now – but it will not work for much longer.*

Once his warriors locked with her mailed fist.

The Awl spear-heads were now nearing the flat of the riverbed – the two sides would engage on the hard-packed sand of the bed itself. No advantage of slope to either side – *until the tide shifts. One way or the other – no, do not think—*

A new reverberation trembled through the ground now.

Deeper, rolling, ominous.

From the dust, between the Awl wedges, huge shapes loomed, rumbled forward.

Wagons. *Awl wagons, the six-wheeled bastards* – not drawn, but pushed. Their beds were crowded with half-naked warriors, spears bristling. The entire front end of each rocking, pitching wagon was a horizontal forest of oversized spears. Round-shields overlapped to form a half-turtleshell that encased the forward section.

They now thundered through the broad gaps between the wedges – twenty, fifty, a hundred – lumbering yet rolling so swiftly after the long descent into the valley that the masses of burly warriors who had been pushing them now trailed in their wake, sprinting to catch up.

The wagons plunged straight into the face of the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry.

Armoured bodies cartwheeled above the press as the entire saw-tooth formation was torn apart – and now the bare-chested fanatics riding those wagons launched themselves out to all sides, screaming like demons.

The three wedges facing the heavy infantry then thrust into the chaotic wake, delivering frenzied slaughter.

Bivatt stared, disbelieving, then snapped, 'Artisan heavy, advance down at the double, crescent, and prepare to cover the retreat.'

The aide beside her stared. 'Retreat, Atri-Preda?'

'You heard me! Signal general withdrawal and sound the Crimson Rampant to retreat! Quickly, before every damned one of them is butchered!'

*Will Redmask follow? Oh, I'll lose heavily if he does – but I'll also hit back hard – on the plain. I'll see his bones burst into flames—*

She heard more wagons, this time to her right. *My other advance* – 'Sound general withdrawal!'

Horns blared.

Shouts behind her. 'Attack on the baggage camp! Attack—'

'Quiet! Do you think the Edur cannot deal with that?'

She prayed Brohl Handar could. Without supplies this campaign was over. *Without supplies, we'll never make it back to Drene. Errant fend, I have been outwitted at every turn—*

And now the sound behind her was rising to challenge that in the valley below. With sick dread, she tugged her horse round and rode back, past the signallers' platform.

Her remaining reserve units had all wheeled round, reversing their facing. Seeing an officer riding between two of the squares, Bivatt spurred to catch him.

'What in the Errant's name is happening over there?' she demanded. Distant screams, the reek of smoke, thunder—

The helmed head swung round, the face beneath it pale. 'Demons, Atri-Preda! The mages pursue them—'

'*They what?* Recall them, damn you! *Recall them now!* '

Brohl Handar sat astride his horse in the company of eight Arapay war leaders, four warlocks and the Den-Ratha K'risnan. The two thousand foot soldiers – Tiste Edur warriors, categorized in Letherii military terms as medium to light infantry – were arranged into eight distinct blocks, fully caparisoned in armour and awaiting the word to march.

The supply train's camp was sprawled on a broad, mostly level hill fifteen hundred paces to the west, the corralled beasts of burden milling beneath dust and slowly drifting dung-smoke. The Overseer could see hospital tents rising along the near side, the canvas sides bright in the morning light. Above another hill, north of the train's camp, wheeled two hawks or perhaps eagles. The sky was otherwise empty, a span of deep blue slowly paling as the sun climbed higher.

Butterflies flitted among small yellow flowers – their wings matched precisely the colour of the petals, Brohl realized, surprised that he had not noted such a detail before. *Nature understands disguise and deceit. Nature reminds us what it is to survive.* The Tiste Edur had well grasped those truths – grey as the shadows from which they had been born; grey as the

boles of the trees in the murky forests of this world; grey as the shrouds of dusk.

'What have we forgotten?' he murmured.

An Arapay war leader – a Preda – turned his helmed head, the scarred face beneath its jutting rim hidden in shadow. 'Overseer? We are positioned as you commanded—'

'Never mind,' Brohl Handar cut in, inexplicably irritated by the veteran's attention. 'What is the guard at the camp?'

'Four hundred mixed infantry,' the warrior replied, then shrugged. 'These Letherii are ever confident.'

'Comes with overwhelming superiority,' another Arapay drawled.

The first Preda nodded. 'I do well recall, old friend, the surprise on their faces the day we shattered them outside Letheras. As if, all at once, the world revealed itself to be other than what they had always believed. That look – it was *disbelief*.' The warrior grunted a laugh. 'Too busy with their denial to adapt when it was needed most.'

'Enough of this,' Brohl Handar snapped. 'The Atri-Preda's forces have engaged the Awl – can you not hear?' He twisted on his saddle and squinted eastward. 'See the dust.' He was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he turned to the first Arapay Preda. 'Take two cohorts to the camp. Four hundred Letherii are not enough.'

'Overseer, what if we are called on to reinforce the Atri-Preda?'

'If we are, then this day is lost. I have given you my order.'

A nod, and the Preda spurred his horse towards the arrayed Edur warriors.

Brohl Handar studied the K'risnan at his side for a moment. The bent creature sat hunched in his saddle like a bloated crow. He was hooded, no doubt to hide the twisted ravaging of his once-handsome features. A chief 's son, transformed into a ghastly icon of the chaotic power before which the Tiste Edur now knelt. He saw the figure twitch. 'What assails you?' the Overseer demanded.

'Something, nothing.' The reply was guttural, the words misshaped by a malformed throat. It was the sound of pain, enduring and unyielding.

'Which?'

Another twitch, passing, Brohl realized, for a shrug. 'Footfalls on dead land.'

'An Awl war-party?'

'No.' The hooded head pivoted until the shadow-swallowed face was directed at the Overseer. 'Heavier.'

All at once Brohl Handar recalled the enormous taloned tracks found at the destroyed homestead. He straightened, one hand reaching for the Arapay scimitar at his side. 'Where? Which direction?'

A long pause, then the K'risnan pointed with a clawed hand.

Towards the supply camp.

Where sudden screams erupted.

'Cohorts at the double!' Brohl Handar bellowed. 'K'risnan, you and your warlocks – with me!' With that he spurred his horse, kicking the startled beast into a canter, then a gallop.

Ahead, he saw, the Arapay Preda who had been escorting the two cohorts had already commanded them into a half-jog. The warrior's helmed head turned and tracked the Overseer and his cadre of mages as they pounded past.

Ahead, the braying of terrified oxen and mules rose, mournful and helpless, above the sounds of slaughter. Tents had gone down, guide-ropes whipping into the air, and Brohl saw figures now, fleeing the camp, pelting northward—

—where a perfect Awl ambush awaited them. Rising from the high grasses. Arrows, javelins, sleeting through the air. Bodies sprawling, tumbling, then the savages, loosing war-cries, rushing to close with spears, axes and swords.

*Nothing to be done for them – poor bastards. We need to save our supplies.*

They reached the faint slope and rode hard towards the row of hospital tents.

The beast that burst into view directly before them was indeed a demon – an image that closed like talons in his mind – the shock of recognition. *Our ancient enemy – it must be – the Edur cannot forget –*

Head thrust forward on a sinuous neck, broad jaw open to reveal dagger fangs. Massive shoulders behind the neck, long heavily muscled arms with huge curved blades of iron strapped where hands should have been. Leaning far forward as it ran towards them on enormous hind legs, the huge tail thrust straight back for balance, the beast was suddenly in their midst.

Horses screamed. Brohl found himself to the demon's right, almost within reach of those scything sword blades, and he stared in horror as that viper's head snapped forward, jaws closing on the neck of a horse, closing, crunching, then tearing loose, blood spraying, its mouth still filled with meat and bone, the horse's spine half ripping loose from the horrid gap left in the wake of those savage jaws. A blade cut in half the warlock astride that mount. The other sword slashed down, chopping through another warlock's thigh, the saddle, then deep into the horse's shoulder, smashing scapula, then ribs. The beast collapsed beneath the blow, as the rider – the severed stump of his leg gushing blood – pitched over, balanced for a moment on the one stirrup, then sprawled to land on the ground, even as another horse's stamping hoof descended onto his upturned face.

The Overseer's horse seemed to collide with something, snapping both front legs. The animal's plunging fall threw Brohl over its head. He struck, rolled, the scimitar's blade biting into his left leg, and came to a stop facing his thrashing mount. The demon's tail had swept into and through their path.

He saw it wheel for a return attack.

A foaming wave of sorcery rose into its path, lifting, climbing with power.

The demon vanished from Brohl's view behind that churning wave.

Sun's light suddenly blotted—

—the demon in the air, arcing over the crest of the K'risnan's magic, then down, the talons of its hind feet outstretched. One closing on another warlock, pushing the head down at an impossible angle into the cup between the man's shoulders as the demon's weight descended – the horse crumpling beneath that overwhelming force, legs snapping like twigs. The other raking towards the K'risnan, a glancing blow that flung him from the back of his bolting horse, the claws catching the horse's rump before it could lunge out of reach, the talons sinking deep, then tearing free a mass of meat to reveal – in a gory flash – the bones of its hips and upper legs.

The horse crashed down in a twisting fall that cracked ribs, less than three strides away from where Brohl was lying. He saw the whites of the beast's eyes – shock and terror, death's own spectre—

The Overseer sought to rise, but something was wrong with his left leg – drained of all strength, strangely heavy, sodden in the tangled grass. He looked down. Red from the hip down – his own scimitar had opened a deep, welling gash at an angle over his thigh, the cut ending just above the knee.

A killing wound – blood pouring out – Brohl Handar fell back, staring up at the sky, disbelieving. *I have killed myself.*

He heard the thump of the demon's feet, swift, moving away – then a deeper sound, the rush of warriors, closing now around him, weapons drawn. Heads turned, faces stretched as words were shouted – he could not understand them, the sounds fading, retreating – a figure crawling to his side, hooded, blood dripping from its nose – the only part of the face that was visible – a gnarled hand reaching for him – and Brohl Handar closed his eyes.

Atri-Preda Bivatt sawed the reins of her horse as she came between two units of her reserve medium infantry, Artisan on her right, Harridict on her left, and beyond them, where another Artisan unit was positioned, there was the commotion of fighting.

She saw a reptilian monstrosity plunging into their ranks – soldiers seeming to melt from its path, others lifting into the air on both sides, in welters of blood, as the beast's taloned hands slashed right and left. Dark-hued, perfectly balanced on two massive hind legs, the demon tore a path straight to the heart of the packed square—

Reaching out, both hands closing on a single figure, a woman, a mage – plucking her flailing into the air, then dismembering her as would a child a straw doll.

Beyond, she could see, the southernmost unit, seven hundred and fifty medium infantry of the Merchants' Battalion, were a milling mass strewn with dead and dying soldiers.

'Sorcery!' she screamed, wheeling towards the Artisan unit on her right – seeking out the mage in its midst – motion, someone pushing through the ranks.

Dust clouds caught her eye – the camp – the Edur legion was nowhere in sight – they had rushed to its defence. *Against more of these demons?*

The creature barrelled free of the Artisan soldiers south of the now-retreating Harridict unit, where a second sorceror stumbled into view, running towards the other mage. She could see his mouth moving as he wove magic, adding his power to that of the first.

The demon had spun to its left instead of continuing its attack, launching itself into a run, wheeling round the unit it had just torn through, placing them between itself and the sorcery now bursting loose in a refulgent tumult from the ground in front of the mages.

Leaning far forward, the demon's speed was astonishing as it fled.

Bivatt heard the ritual sputter and die and she twisted on her saddle. 'Damn you! Hit it!'

'Your soldiers!'

'You took too long!' She spied a Preda from the Harridict unit. 'Draw all the reserves behind the mages! North, you fool – sound the order! Cadre,

keep that damned magic at the ready!'

'We are, Atri-Preda!'

Chilled despite the burgeoning heat, Bivatt swung her horse round once more and rode hard back towards the valley. *I am outwitted. Flinching on every side, recoiling, reacting – Redmask, this one is yours.*

*But I will have you in the end. I swear it.*

Ahead, she could see her troops appearing on the rise, withdrawing in order, in what was clearly an uncontested retreat. Redmask, it seemed, was satisfied – he would not be drawn out from the valley, even with his demonic allies—

The camp. She needed to get her soldiers back to that damned camp – *pray the Edur beat off the attack. Pray Brohl Handar has not forgotten how to think like a soldier.*

*Pray he fared better than I did this day.*

*The shore is blind to the sea. Might as well say the moon has for ever fled the night sky.* Chilled, exhausted, Yan Tovis rode with her three soldiers down the level, narrow road. Thick stands of trees on either side, the leaves black where the moon's light did not reach, the banks high and steep evincing the antiquity of this trail to the shore, roots reaching down witch-braided, gnarled and dripping in the clammy darkness. Stones snapping beneath hooves, the gusts of breath from the horses, the muted crackle of shifting armour. Dawn was still two bells away.

*Blind to the sea.* The sea's thirst was ceaseless. The truth of that could be seen in its endless gnawing of the shore, could be heard in its hungry voice, could be found in the bitter poison of its taste. The Shake knew that in the beginning the world had been nothing but sea, and that in the end it would be the same. The water rising, devouring all, and this was an inexorable fate to which the Shake were helpless witness.

The shore's battle had ever been the battle of her people. The Isle, which had once been sacred, had been desecrated, made a fetid prison by the Letherii. *Yet now it is freed once again. Too late.* Generations past there had

been land bridges linking the many islands south of the Reach. Now gone. The Isle itself rose from the sea with high cliffs, everywhere but the single harbour now. Such was the dying world.

Often among the Shake there had been born demon-kissed children. Some would be chosen by the coven and taught the Old Ways; the rest would be flung from those cliffs, down into the thirsty sea. Gift of mortal blood; momentary, pathetic easing of its need.

She had run, years ago, for a reason. The noble blood within her had burned like poison, the barbaric legacy of her people overwhelmed her with shame and guilt. With the raw vigour of youth she had refused to accept the barbaric brutality of her ancestors, refused to wallow in the cloying, suffocating nihilism of a self-inflicted crime.

All of the defiance within her was obliterated when she had seen for herself the birth of a demon-kissed monstrosity – the taloned hands and feet, the scaled, elongated face, the blunt tail twitching like a headless worm, the eyes of lurid green. If naught but the taloned hands and feet had marked the demon's seed, the coven would have chosen this newborn, for there was true power in demonic blood when no more than a single drop trickled in the child's veins. More than that, and the creation was an abomination.

*Grotesque babes crawling in the muck of the sea's floor, claws gouging furrows in the dark, the sea's legion, the army awaiting us all.*

The seeds thrived in the foaming waves where they met the land, generation upon generation. Flung high onto the shore, they sank into the ground. Dwelling within living creatures, prey and predator; bound inside plants; adhering to the very blades of grass, the leaves of the trees – these seeds could not be escaped: another bitter truth among the Shake. When they found a woman's womb where a child was already growing, the seed stole its fate. Seeking . . . something, yet yielding naught but a shape that warred with that of the human.

The demons had been pure, once. Birthing their own kind, a world of mothers and offspring. The seeds had dwelt in the sea found in demonic

wombs. Until the war that saw the bellies of those mothers slit open, spilling what belonged inside out into this world – the seeds even the sea sought to reject. A war of slaughter – yet the demons had found a way to survive, to this very day. In the swirling spume of tidal pools, in the rush of tumbling, crashing waves. Lost, yet not defeated. Gone, yet poised to return.

*Seeking the right mother.*

So the witches remained. Yan Tovis had believed the coven obliterated, crushed into extinction – the Letherii well knew that resistance to tyranny was nurtured in schools of faith, espoused by old, bitter priests and priestesses, by elders who would work through the foolish young – use them like weapons, flung away when broken, melodramatically mourned when destroyed. Priests and priestesses whose version of faith justified the abuse of their own followers.

The birth of a priesthood, Yan Tovis now understood, forced a hierarchy upon piety, as if the rules of servitude were malleable, where such a scheme – shrouded in mysterious knowledge and learning – conveyed upon the life of a priest or priestess greater value and virtue than those of the ignorant common folk.

In her years of Letherii education, Yan Tovis had seen how the arrival of shouldermen – of warlocks and witches – was in truth a devolution among the Shake, a devolution from truly knowing the god that was the shore. Artifice and secular ambition, withholding sacred knowledge from those never to be initiated – these were not the shore's will. *No, only what the warlocks and witches wanted.*

*Taloned hands and feet have proved iconic indeed.*

But power came with demonic blood. And so long as every child born with such power and allowed to survive was initiated into the coven, then that power remained exclusive.

The Letherii in their conquest of the Shake had conducted a pogrom against the coven.

And had failed.

With all her being, Yan Tovis wished they had succeeded.

The Shake were gone as a people. Even the soldiers of her company – each one carefully selected over the years on the basis of Shake remnants in their blood – were in truth more Letherii than Shake. She had done little, after all, to awaken their heritage.

*Yet I chose them, did I not? I wanted their loyalty, beyond that of a Letherii soldier for his or her Atri-Preda.*

*Admit it, Twilight. You are a queen now, and these soldiers* – these Shake – *know it. And it is what you sought in the depths of your own ambition.* And now, it seemed, she would have to face the truth of that ambition, the stirring of her noble blood – seeking its proper pre-eminence, its *right*.

*What has brought my half-brother to the shore? Did he ride as a Shake, or a Letherii Master at Arms for a Dresh-Preda?* But she found she could not believe her own question. She knew the answer, quivering like a knife in her soul. *The shore is blind . . .*

They rode on in the dark.

*We were never as the Nerek, the Tarthenal and the others. We could raise no army against the invaders. Our belief in the shore held no vast power, for it is a belief in the mutable, in transformation. A god with no face but every face. Our temple is the strand where the eternal war between land and sea is waged, a temple that rises only to crumble yet again. Temple of sound, of smell, taste and tears upon every fingertip.*

*Our coven healed wounds, scoured away diseases, and murdered babies.*

*The Tarthenal viewed us with horror. The Nerek hunted our folk in the forests. For the Faered, we were child-snatchers in the night. They would leave us husks of bread on tree stumps, as if we were no better than malignant crows.*

*Of these people, these Shake, I am now Queen.*

And a man who would be her husband awaited her. On the Isle.

*Errant take me, I am too tired for this.*

Horse-hoofs splashing through puddles where the old road dipped – they were nearing the shore. Ahead, the land rose again – some long-ago high tide mark, a broad ridge of smoothed stones and cobbles bedded in sandy clay – the kind of clay that became shale beneath the weight of time, pocked by the restless stones. In that shale one could find embedded shells, mollusc fragments, proof of the sea's many victories.

The trees were sparser here, bent down by the wind that she could not yet feel on her face – a calm that surprised her, given the season. The smell of the shore was heavy in the air, motionless and fetid.

They slowed their mounts. From the as yet unseen sea there was no sound, not even the whisper of gentle waves. As if the world on the other side of the ridge had vanished.

'Tracks here, sir,' one of her soldiers said as they drew to a halt close to the slope. 'Riders, skirting the bank, north and south both.'

'As if they were hunting someone,' another observed.

Yan Tovis held up a gauntleted hand.

Horses to the north, riding at the canter, approaching.

Struck by a sudden, almost superstitious fear, Yan Tovis made a gesture, and her soldiers drew their swords. She reached for her own.

The first of the riders appeared.

Letherii.

Relaxing, Yan Tovis released her breath. 'Hold, soldier!'

The sudden command clearly startled the figure and the three other riders behind it. Hoofs skidding on loose pebbles.

Armoured as if for battle – chain hauberks, the blackened rings glistening, visors drawn down on their helms. The lead rider held a long-handled single-bladed axe in his right hand; those behind him wielded lances, the heads wide and barbed as if the troop had been hunting boar.

Yan Tovis nudged her horse round and guided it a few steps closer. 'I am Atri-Preda Yan Tovis,' she said.

A tilt of the helmed head from the lead man. 'Yedan Derryg,' he said in a low voice, 'Master at Arms, Boaral Keep.'

She hesitated, then said, 'The Watch.'

'Twilight,' he replied. 'Even in this gloom, I can see it is you.'

'I find that difficult to believe – you fled—'

'Fled, my Queen?'

'The House of our mother, yes.'

'Your father and I did not get along, Twilight. You were but a toddler when last I saw you. But that does not matter. I see now in your face what I saw then. No mistaking it.'

Sighing, she dismounted.

After a moment, the others did the same. Yedan gestured with a tilt of his head and he and Yan Tovis walked off a short distance. Stood beneath the tallest tree this close to the ridge – a dead pine – as a light rain began to fall.

'I have just come from the Keep,' she said. 'Your Dresh attempted to escape arrest and is dead. Or will be soon. I have had a word with the witches. There will be Tiste Edur, from Rennis, but by the time they arrive the investigation will be over and I will have to apologize for wasting their time.'

Yedan said nothing. The grilled visor thoroughly hid his features, although the black snarl of his beard was visible – it seemed he was slowly chewing something.

'Watch,' she resumed, 'you called me "Queen" in front of your soldiers.'

'They are Shake.'

'I see. Then, you are here . . . at the shore—'

'Because I am the Watch, yes.'

'That title is without meaning,' she said, rather more harshly than she had intended. 'It's an honorific, some old remnant—'

'I believed the same,' he cut in – *like an older brother, damn him* – 'until three nights ago.'

'Why are you here, then? Who are you looking for?'

'I wish I could answer you better than I can. I am not sure why I am here, only that I am summoned.'

'By whom?'

He seemed to chew some more, then he said, 'By the shore.'

'I see.'

'As for who – or what – I am looking for, I cannot say at all. Strangers have arrived. We heard them this night, yet no matter where we rode, no matter how quickly we arrived, we found no-one. Nor any sign – no tracks, nothing. Yet . . . they are here.'

'Perhaps ghosts then.'

'Perhaps.'

Twilight slowly turned. 'From the sea?'

'Again, no tracks on the strand. Sister, since we have arrived, the air has not stirred. Not so much as a sigh. Day and night, the shore is still.' He tilted his head upward. 'Now, this rain – the first time.'

A murmur from the soldiers drew their attention. They were facing the ridge, six motionless spectres, metal and leather gleaming.

Beyond the ridge, the fitful rise and ebb of a glow.

'This,' Yedan said, and he set off.

Yan Tovis followed.

They scrambled through loose stones, stripped branches and naked roots, pulling themselves onto the rise. The six soldiers in their wake now on the

slope, Yan Tovis moved to her half-brother's side, pushing through the soft brush until they both emerged onto the shoreline.

Where they halted, staring out to sea.

Ships.

A row of ships, all well offshore. Reaching to the north, to the south.

*All burning.*

'Errant's blessing,' Yan Tovis whispered.

*Hundreds of ships. Burning.*

Flames playing over still water, columns of smoke rising, lit from beneath like enormous ash-dusted coals in the bed of the black sky.

'Those,' Yedan said, 'are not Letherii ships. Nor Edur.'

'No,' Twilight whispered, 'they are not.'

*Strangers have arrived.*

'What means this?' There was raw fear in the question, and Yan Tovis turned to look at the soldier who had spoken. Faint on his features, the orange glow of the distant flames.

She looked back at the ships. 'Dromons,' she said. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest, a kind of febrile excitement – strangely dark with malice and . . . *savage delight.*

'What name is that?' Yedan asked.

'I know them – those prows, the rigging. Our search – a distant continent. An empire. We killed hundreds – thousands – of its subjects. We clashed with its fleets.' She was silent for a dozen breaths, then she turned to one of her soldiers. 'Ride back to the Keep. Make sure the Dresh is dead. The company is to leave immediately – we will meet you north of Rennis on the coast road. Oh, and bring those damned witches with you.'

Yedan said, 'What—'

She cut off her half-brother with cruel glee. 'You are the Watch. Your Queen needs you.' She glared at him. 'You will ride with us, Yedan. With your troop.'

The bearded jaw bunched, then, 'Where?'

'The Isle.'

'What of the Letherii and their masters? We should send warning.'

Eyes on the burning hulks in the sea, she almost snarled her reply. 'We killed their subjects. And clearly they will not let that pass. Errant take the Letherii and the Edur.' She spun round, making for her horse. The others scrambled after her. 'Strangers, Yedan? Not to me. They followed us.' She swung herself onto her horse and tugged it towards the north trail. 'We left a debt in blood,' she said, baring her teeth. 'Malazan blood. *And it seems they will not let that stand.'*

*They are here. On this shore.*

*The Malazans are on our shore.*

# BOOK THREE

# KNUCKLES OF THE SOUL

We are eager
to impugn the beast crouched
in our souls
but this creature is pure
with shy eyes
and it watches our frantic crimes
cowering
in the cage of our cruelty

I will take
for myself and your fate
in these hands
the grace of animal to amend
broken dreams –
freedom unchained and unbound
long running –
the beast will kill when I murder

In absolution
a list of unremarked distinctions
availed these hands
freedom without excuse
see how clean
this blood compared to yours
the death grin
of your bestial snarl mars the scape

Of your face
this is what sets us apart
in our souls
my beast and I chained together
as we must
who leads and who is the led is
never quite asked
of the charmed and the innocent

*Dog in an Alley*
*Confessions*
Tibal Feredict

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Keel and half a hull remained of the wreck where us wreckers gathered, and the storm of the night past remained like spit in the air when we clambered down into that bent-rib bed.

I heard many a prayer muttered, hands flashing to ward this and that as befits each soul's need, its conversation with fear begun in childhood no doubt and, could I recall mine, I too would have been of mind to mime flight from terror.

As it was I could only look down at that crabshell harvest of tiny skeletons, the tailed imps with the humanlike faces, their hawk talons and all sorts of strange embellishments to give perfect detail to the bright sunny nightmare.

No wonder is it I forswore the sea that day. Storm and broken ship had lifted a host most unholy and oh there were plenty more no doubt, ringing this damned island.

As it was, it was me who then spoke a most unsavoury tumble of words. 'I guess not all imps can fly.'

For all that, it was hardly cause to gouge out my eyes now, was it?

Blind Tobor of the Reach

'Now there, friends, is one beautiful woman.'

'If that's how you like them.'

'Now why wouldn't I, y'damned barrowdigger? Thing is, and it's always the way isn't it, look at that hopeless thug she's with. I can't figure things like that. She could have anyone in here. She could have me, even. But no, there she is, sittin' aside that limpin' one-armed, one-eared, one-eyed and no-nosed cattle-dog. I mean, talk about ugly.'

The third man, who had yet to speak, gave him a surreptitious, sidelong look, noting the birdnest hair, the jutting steering-oar ears, the bulging eyes, and the piebald patches that were the scars of fire on features that reminded him of a squashed gourd – sidelong and brief, that glance, and Throatslitter quickly looked away. The last thing he wanted to do was break into another one of his trilling, uncanny laughs that seemed to freeze everyone within earshot.

*Never used to have a laugh sounding like that. Damn thing scares even me.* Well, he'd taken a throatful of oily flames and it'd done bad things to his voice-reed. The damage only revealed itself when he laughed, and, he recalled, in the months following . . . *all that stuff* . . . there had been few reasons for mirth.

'There goes that tavernkeeper,' Deadsmell observed.

It was easy talking about anything and everything, since no-one here but them understood Malazan.

'There's another one all moon-eyed over her,' Sergeant Balm said with a sneer. 'But who does she sit with? Hood take me, it don't make sense.'

Deadsmell slowly leaned forward on the table and carefully refilled his tankard. 'It's the delivery of that cask. Brullyg's. Looks like the pretty one and the dead lass have volunteered.'

Balm's bulging eyes bulged even more. 'She ain't dead! I'll tell you what's dead, Deadsmell, that puddle-drowned worm between your legs!'

Throatslitter eyed the corporal. '*If that's how you like them*,' he'd said. A half-strangled gulp escaped him, making both his companions flinch.

'What in Hood's name are you gonna laugh about?' Balm demanded. 'Just don't, and that's an order.'

Throatslitter bit down hard on his own tongue. Tears blurred his vision for a moment as pain shot round his skull like a pebble in a bucket. Mute, he shook his head. *Laugh? Not me.*

The sergeant was glaring at Deadsmell again. 'Dead? She don't look much dead to me.'

'Trust me,' the corporal replied after taking a deep draught. He belched. 'Sure, she's hiding it well, but that woman died some time ago.'

Balm was hunched over the table, scratching at the tangles of his hair. Flakes drifted down to land like specks of paint on the dark wood. 'Gods below,' he whispered. 'Maybe somebody should . . . I don't know . . . maybe . . . tell her?'

Deadsmell's mostly hairless brows lifted. 'Excuse me, ma'am, you have a complexion to die for and I guess that's what you did.'

Another squawk from Throatslitter.

The corporal continued, 'Is it true, ma'am, that perfect hair and expensive make-up can hide anything?'

A choked squeal from Throatslitter.

Heads turned.

Deadsmell drank down another mouthful, warming to the subject. 'Funny, you don't *look* dead.'

The high-pitched cackle erupted.

As it died, sudden silence in the main room of the tavern, barring that of a rolling tankard, which then plunged off a tabletop and bounced on the floor.

Balm glared at Deadsmell. 'You done that. You just kept pushing and pushing. Another word from you, corporal, and you'll be deader than she is.'

'What's that smell?' Deadsmell asked. 'Oh right. Essence of putrescence.'

Balm's cheeks bulged, his face turning a strange purple shade. His yellowy eyes looked moments from leaping out on their stalks.

Throatslitter tried squeezing his own eyes shut, but the image of his sergeant's face burst into his mind. He shrieked behind his hands. Looked round in helpless appeal.

All attention was fixed on them now, no-one speaking. Even the beautiful woman who'd shipped in with that maimed oaf and the oaf himself – whose one good eye glittered out from the folds of a severe frown – had paused, standing each to one side of the cask of ale the tavernkeeper had brought out. And the keeper himself, staring at Throatslitter with mouth hanging open.

'Well,' Deadsmell observed, 'there goes our credit as bad boys. Throaty here's making mating calls – hope there's no turkeys on this island. And you, sergeant, your head looks ready to explode like a cusser.'

Balm hissed, 'It was *your* fault, you bastard!'

'Hardly. As you see, I am calm. Although somewhat embarrassed by my company, alas.'

'Fine, we're shifting you off. Hood knows, Gilani's a damned sight prettier to look at—'

'Yes, but she happens to be alive, sergeant. Not your type at all.'

'I didn't know!'

'Now that is a most pathetic admission, wouldn't you say?'

'Hold on,' Throatslitter finally interjected. 'I couldn't tell about her either, Deadsmell.' He jabbed a finger at the corporal. 'Further proof you're a damned necromancer. No, forget that shocked look, we ain't buying no more. You knew she was dead because you can smell 'em, just like your name says you can. In fact, I'd wager that's why Braven Tooth gave you that name – doesn't miss a thing, ever, does he?'

The ambient noise was slowly resurrecting itself, accompanied by more than a few warding gestures, a couple of chairs scraping back through filth as patrons made furtive escapes out of the front door.

Deadsmell drank more ale. And said nothing.

The dead woman and her companion headed out, the latter limping as he struggled to balance the cask on one shoulder.

Balm grunted. 'There they go. Typical, isn't it? Just when we're under strength, too.'

'Nothing to worry about, sergeant,' Deadsmell said. 'It's all in hand. Though if the keeper decides on following . . .'

Throatslitter grunted. 'If he does, he'll regret it.' He rose then, adjusting the marine-issue rain cape. 'Lucky you two, getting to sit here adding fat to your arses. It's damned cold out there, you know.'

'I'm making note of all this insubordination,' Balm grumbled. Then tapped his head. 'In here.'

'Well that's a relief,' Throatslitter said. He left the tavern.

Shake Brullyg, tyrant of Second Maiden Fort, would-be King of the Isle, slouched in the old prison prefect's high-backed chair and glared from under heavy brows at the two foreigners at the table beside the chamber's door. They were playing another of their damned games. Knuckle bones, elongated wooden bowl and split crow-feathers.

'Two bounces earns me a sweep,' one of them said, although Brullyg was not quite sure of that – picking up a language on the sly was no easy thing, but he'd always been good with languages. Shake, Letherii, Tiste Edur, Fent, trader's tongue and Meckros. And now, spatterings of this . . . this *Malazan*.

Timing. They'd taken it from him, as easily as they'd taken his knife, his war-axe. Foreigners easing into the harbour – not so many aboard as to cause much worry, or so it had seemed. Besides, there had been enough trouble to chew on right then. A sea filled with mountains of ice, bearing down on the Isle, more ominous than any fleet or army. They said they could take care of that – and he'd been a drowning man going down for the last time.

Would-be King of the Isle, crushed and smeared flat under insensate ice. Face to face with that kind of truth had been like dragon claws through his sail. After all he'd done . . .

Timing. He now wondered if these Malazans had brought the ice with them. Sent it spinning down on the season's wild current, just so they could arrive one step ahead and offer to turn it away. He'd not even believed them, Brullyg recalled, but desperation had spoken with its very own voice. *'Do that and you'll be royal guests for as long as you like.'* They'd smiled at that offer.

*I am a fool. And worse.*

And now, two miserable squads ruled over him and every damned resident of this island, and there was not a thing he could do about it. *Except keep the truth from everyone else. And that's getting a whole lot harder with every day that passes.*

'Sweep's in the trough, pluck a knuckle and that about does it,' said the other soldier.

Possibly.

'It skidded when you breathed – I saw it, you cheat!'

'I ain't breathed.'

'Oh right, you're a Hood-damned corpse, are you?'

'No, I just ain't breathed when you said I did. Look, it's in the trough, you deny it?'

'Here, let me take a closer look. Ha, no it isn't!'

'You just sighed and moved it, damn you!'

'I didn't sigh.'

'Right, and you're not losing neither, are ya?'

'Just because I'm losing doesn't mean I sighed right then.

And see, it's not in the trough.'

'Hold on while I breathe—'

'Then I'll sigh!'

'Breathing is what winners do. Sighing is what losers do. Therefore, I win.'

'Sure, for you cheating is as natural as breathing, isn't it?'

Brullyg slowly shifted his attention from the two at the door, regarded the last soldier in the chamber. By the coven she was a beauty. Such dark, magical skin, and those tilted eyes just glowed with sweet invitation – damn him, all the mysteries of the world were in those eyes. And that mouth! Those lips! If he could just get rid of the other two, and maybe steal away those wicked knives of hers, why then he'd discover those mysteries the way she wanted him to.

*I'm King of the Isle. About to be. One more week, and if none of the dead Queen's bitch daughters show up before then, it all falls to me. King of the Isle. Almost. Close enough to use the title, sure. And what woman wouldn't set aside a miserable soldier's life for the soft, warm bed of a king's First Concubine? Sure, that is indeed a Letherii way, but as king I can make my own rules. And if the coven doesn't like it, well, there're the cliffs.*

One of the Malazans at the table said, 'Careful, Masan, he's getting that look again.'

The woman named Masan Gilani straightened catlike in her chair, lifting her smooth, not-scrawny arms in an arching stretch that transformed her large breasts into round globes, tautening the worn fabric of her shirt. "S long as he keeps thinking with the wrong brain, Lobe, we're good and easy.' She then settled back, straightening her perfect legs.

'We should bring him another whore,' the one named Lobe said as he gathered the knuckle bones into a small leather bag.

'No,' Masan Gilani said. 'Deadsmell barely revived the last one.'

*But that's not the real reason, is it? Brullyg smiled. No, you want me for yourself. Besides, I'm not usually like that. I was taking out some . . . frustrations. That's all.* His smile faded. *They sure do use their hands a lot when talking. Gestures of all sorts. Strange people, these Malazans.* He cleared his throat and spoke Letherii in the slow way they seemed to need. 'I

could do with another walk. My legs want exercise.' A wink towards Masan Gilani, who responded with a knowing smile that lit him up low down, enough to make him shift in the chair. 'My people need to see me, you understand? If they start getting suspicious – well, if anybody knows what a house arrest looks like, it is the citizens of Second Maiden Fort.'

In terribly accented Letherii, Lobe said, 'You get your ale comes today, right? Best want to be waiting here for that. We walk you tonight.'

*Like a Liberty mistress her pampered dog. Isn't that nice? And when I lift a leg and piss against you, Lobe, what then?*

These soldiers here did not frighten him. It was the other squad, the one still up-island. The one with that scrawny little mute girl. And she had a way of showing up as if from nowhere. From a swirl of light – he wondered what the Shake witches would make of that cute trick. All Lobe needed to do – Lobe, or Masan Gilani, or Galt, any of them – all they needed to do was call her name.

*Sinn.*

A real terror that one, and not a talon showing. He suspected he'd need the whole coven to get rid of her. Preferably with great losses. The coven had a way of crowding the chosen rulers of the Shake. *And they're on their way, like ravens to a carcass, all spit and cackle. Of course, they can't fly. Can't even swim. No, they'll need boats, to take them across the strait – and that's assuming the Reach isn't now a jumbled mass of ice, which is how it looks from here.*

The soldier named Galt rose from his chair, wincing at some twinge in his lower back, then ambled over to what had been the prefect's prize possession, a tapestry that dominated an entire wall. Faded with age – and stained in the lower left corner with dried spatters of the poor prefect's blood – the hanging depicted the First Landing of the Letherii, although in truth that was not the colonizers' first landing. The fleet had come within sight of shore somewhere opposite the Reach. Fent canoes had ventured out to establish contact with the strangers. An exchange of gifts had gone awry, resulting in the slaughter of the Fent men and the subsequent enslavement

of the women and children in the village. Three more settlements had suffered the same fate. The next four, southward down the coast, had been hastily abandoned.

The fleet had eventually rounded Sadon Peninsula on the north coast of the Ouster Sea, then sailed past the Lenth Arm and into Gedry Bay. The city of Gedry was founded on the place of the First Landing, at the mouth of the Lether River. This tapestry, easily a thousand years old, was proof enough of that. The general belief these days was that the landing occurred at the site of the capital itself, well up the river. Strange how the past was remade to suit the present. A lesson there Brullyg could use, once he was king. The Shake were a people of failure, fated to know naught but tragedy and pathos. Guardians of the shore, but incapable of guarding it against the sea's tireless hunger. All of that needed . . . revising.

The Letherii had known defeat. Many times. Their history on this land was bloody, rife with their betrayals, their lies, their heartless cruelties. All of which were now seen as triumphant and heroic.

*This is how a people must see itself. As we Shake must. A blinding beacon on this dark shore. When I am king . . .*

'Look at this damned thing,' Galt said. 'Here, that writing in the borders – that could be Ehrlii.'

'But it isn't,' Lobe muttered. He had dismantled one of his daggers; on the table before him was the pommel, a few rivets and pins, a wooden handle wrapped in leather, a slitted hilt and the tanged blade. It seemed the soldier was now at a loss on how to put it all back together again.

'Some of the letters—'

'Ehrlii and Letherii come from the same language,' Lobe said.

Galt's glare was suspicious. 'How do you know that?'

'I don't, you idiot. It's just what I was told.'

'Who?'

'Ebron, I think. Or Shard. What difference does it make? Somebody who knows things, that's all. Hood, you're making my brain hurt. And look at this mess.'

'Is that my knife?'

'Was.'

Brullyg saw Lobe cock his head, then the soldier said, 'Footsteps bottom of the stairs.' And with these words, his hands moved in a blur, and even as Galt was walking towards the door, Lobe was twisting home the pommel and flipping the knife into Galt's path. Where it was caught one-handed – Galt had not even slowed in passing.

Brullyg settled back in his chair.

Rising, Masan Gilani loosened from their scabbards the vicious-looking long-bladed knives at her hips. 'Wish I was with my own squad,' she said, then drew a step closer to where Brullyg sat.

'Stay put,' she murmured.

Mouth dry, he nodded.

'It's likely the ale delivery,' Lobe said from one side of the door, while Galt unlocked it and pushed it out wide enough to enable him to peer through the crack.

'Sure, but those boots sound wrong.'

'Not the usual drooling fart and his son?'

'Not even close.'

'All right.' Lobe reached under the table and lifted into view a crossbow. A truly foreign weapon, constructed entirely of iron – or something very much like Letherii steel. The cord was thick as a man's thumb, and the quarrel set into the groove was tipped with an x-shaped head that would punch through a Letherii shield as if it was birch bark. The soldier cranked the claw back and somehow locked it in place. Then he moved along the door's wall to the corner.

Galt edged back as the footsteps on the stairs drew nearer. He made a series of hand gestures to which Masan Gilani grunted in response and Brullyg heard ripping cloth behind him and a moment later the point of a knife pressed between his shoulder blades – thrust right through the damned chair. She leaned down. 'Be nice and be stupid, Brullyg. We know these two and we can guess why they're here.'

Glancing back at Masan Gilani, nodding once, Galt then moved into the doorway, opening wide the door. 'Well,' he drawled in his dreadful Letherii, 'if it isn't the captain and her first mate. Run out of money comes too soon? What you making to comes with ale?'

A heavy growl from beyond. 'What did he say, Captain?'

'Whatever it was, he said it badly.' A woman, and that voice – Brullyg frowned. That was a voice he had heard before. The knife tip dug deeper into his spine.

'We're bringing Shake Brullyg his ale,' the woman continued.

'That's nice,' Galt replied. 'We see he comes gets it.'

'Shake Brullyg's an old friend of mine. I want to see him.'

'He's busy.'

'Doing what?'

'Thinking.'

'Shake Brullyg? I really doubt that – and who in the Errant's name are you anyway? You're no Letherii, and you and those friends of yours hanging out at the tavern, well, none of you were prisoners here either. I asked around. You're from that strange ship anchored in the bay.'

'Why, Captain, it is simple. We comes to goes all the ice. So Brullyg he rewards us. Guests. Royal guests. Now we keep him company. He is smiles nice all the time. We nice too.'

'Nice idiots, I think,' the man outside – presumably the captain's first mate – said in a growl. 'Now, my arm's getting tired – move aside and let me

deliver this damned thing.'

Galt glanced back over a shoulder at Masan Gilani, who said in Malazan, 'Why you looking at me? I'm just here to keep this man's tongue hanging.'

Brullyg licked sweat from his lips. *So even knowing that, why does it still work? Am I that stupid?* 'Let them in,' he said in a low voice. 'So I can ease their minds and send them away.'

Galt looked at Masan Gilani again, and though she said nothing, some kind of communication must have passed between them, for he shrugged and stepped back. 'Comes the ale.'

Brullyg watched as the two figures entered the chamber. The one in the lead was Skorgen Kaban the Pretty. Which meant . . . yes. The would-be king smiled, 'Shurq Elalle. You've not aged a day since I last saw you. And Skorgen – put the cask down, before you dislocate your shoulder and add lopsided to your list of ailments. Broach the damned thing and we can all have a drink. Oh,' he added as he watched the two pirates take in the soldiers – Skorgen almost jumping when he saw Lobe in the corner, crossbow now cradled in his arms – 'these are some of my royal guests. At the door, Galt. In the corner, Lobe, and this lovely here with the one hand behind the back of my chair is Masan Gilani.'

Shurq Elalle collected one of the chairs near the door and dragged it opposite Brullyg. Sitting, she folded one leg over the other and laced her hands together on her lap. 'Brullyg, you half-mad cheating miser of a bastard. If you were alone I'd be throttling that flabby neck of yours right now.'

'Can't say I'm shocked by your animosity,' Shake Brullyg replied, suddenly comforted by his Malazan bodyguards. 'But you know, it was never as bad or ugly as you thought it was. You just never gave me the chance to explain—'

Shurq's smile was both beautiful and dark. 'Why, Brullyg, you were never one to explain yourself.'

'A man changes.'

'That'd be a first.'

Brullyg resisted shrugging, since that would have opened a nasty slit in the flesh of his back. Instead, he lifted his hands, palms up, as he said, 'Let's set aside all that history. The *Undying Gratitude* rests safe and sound in my harbour. Cargo offloaded and plenty of coin in your purse. I imagine you're itching to leave our blessed isle.'

'Something like that,' she replied. 'Alas, it seems we're having trouble getting, uh, permission. There's the biggest damned ship I've ever seen blocking the harbour mouth right now, and a sleek war galley of some kind is making for berth at the main pier. You know,' she added, with another quick smile, 'it's all starting to look like some kind of . . . well . . . *blockade*.'

The knife-point left Brullyg's back and Masan Gilani, sliding the weapon into its scabbard, stepped round. When she spoke this time, it was in a language Brullyg had never heard before.

Lobe levelled the crossbow again, aiming towards Brullyg, and answered Masan in the same tongue.

Skorgen, who had been kneeling beside the cask, thumping at the spigot with the heel of one hand, now rose. 'What in the Errant's name is going on here, Brullyg?'

A voice spoke from the doorway, 'Just this. Your captain's right. Our waiting's done.'

The soldier named Throatslitter was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed. He was smiling across at Masan Gilani. 'Good news ain't it? Now you can take your delicious curves and such and dance your way down to the pier – I'm sure Urb and the rest are missing 'em something awful.'

Shurq Elalle, who had not moved from her chair, sighed loudly then said, 'Pretty, I don't think we'll be leaving this room for a while. Find us some tankards and pour, why don't you?'

'We're hostages?'

'No no,' his captain replied. 'Guests.'

Masan Gilani, hips swaying considerably more than was necessary, sauntered out of the chamber.

Under his breath, Brullyg groaned.

'As I said earlier,' Shurq murmured, 'men don't change.' She glanced over at Galt, who had drawn up the other chair. 'I assume you won't let me strangle this odious worm.'

'Sorry, no.' A quick smile. 'Not yet anyway.'

'So, who are your friends in the harbour?'

Galt winked. 'We've a little work to do, Captain. And we've decided this island will do just fine as headquarters.'

'Your skill with Letherii has noticeably improved.'

'Must be your fine company, Captain.'

'Don't bother,' Throatslitter said from the doorway.

'Deadsmell says she's standing on the wrong side of Hood's gate, despite what you see or think you see.'

Galt slowly paled.

'Not sure what he means by all that,' Shurq Elalle said, her sultry eyes settling on Galt, 'but my appetites are as lively as ever.'

'That's . . . disgusting.'

'Explains the sweat on your brow, I suppose.'

Galt hastily wiped his forehead. 'This one's worse than Masan Gilani,' he complained.

Brullyg shifted nervously in his chair. Timing. These damned Malazans had it by the bucketful. *Freedom should've lasted longer than this.* 'Hurry up with that ale, Pretty.'

Finding yourself standing, alone, cut loose, with an unhappy army squirming in your hands, was a commander's greatest nightmare. *And when*

*you got them running straight into the wilderness of an ocean at the time, it's about as bad as it can get.*

Fury had united them, for a while. Until the truth started to sink in, like botfly worms under the skin. Their homeland wanted them all dead. There'd be no seeing family – no wives, husbands, mothers, fathers. No children to bounce on one knee while working numbers in the head – wondering which neighbour's eyes you're looking down at. No chasms to cross, no breaches to mend. Every loved one as good as dead.

Armies get unruly when that happens. Almost as bad as no loot and no pay.

*We were soldiers of the empire. Our families depended on the wages, the tax relief, the buy-outs and the pensions. And a lot of us were young enough to think about signing out, making a new life, one that didn't involve swinging a sword and looking in the eye of some snarling thug wanting to cut you in two. Some of us were damned tired.*

*So, what kept us together?*

*Well, no ship likes to sail alone, does it?*

But Fist Blistig knew that there was more to it. Dried blood holding everyone in place like glue. The seared burn of betrayal, the sting of fury. And a commander who sacrificed her own love to see them all survive.

He had spent too many days and nights on the *Froth Wolf* standing no less than five paces from the Adjunct, studying her stiff back as she faced the surly seas. A woman who showed nothing, but some things no mortal could hide, and one of those things was grief. He had stared and he had wondered. Was she going to come through this? Someone – might have been Keneb, who at times seemed to understand Tavore better than anyone else, maybe even Tavore herself – had then made a fateful decision. The Adjunct had lost her aide. In Malaz City. Aide, and lover. Now, maybe nothing could be done about the lover, but the role of aide was an official position, a necessary one for any commander. Not a man, of course – would have to be a woman for certain.

Blistig recalled that night, even as the eleventh bell was sounded on deck – the ragged fleet, flanked by the Perish Thrones of War, was three days east of Kartool, beginning a northward-wending arc to take them round the tumultuous, deadly straits between Malaz Island and the coast of Korel – and the Adjunct was standing alone just beyond the forecastle mast, the wind tugging fitfully at her rain cape, making Blistig think of a broken-winged crow. A second figure appeared, halting close to Tavore on her left. *Where T'amber would stand, where any aide to a commander would stand.*

Tavore's head had turned in startlement, and words were exchanged – too low for Blistig's ears – followed by a salute from the newcomer.

*The Adjunct is alone. So too is another woman, seemingly as bound up in grief as Tavore herself, yet this one possesses an edge, an anger tempered like Aren steel. Short on patience, which might be precisely what's needed here.*

*Was it you, Keneb?*

Of course, Lostara Yil, once a captain in the Red Blades, now just one more outlawed soldier, had revealed no inclinations to take a woman to her bed. Not anyone, in fact. Yet she was no torture to look at, if one had a taste for broken glass made pretty. That and Pardu tattoos. But it was just as likely that the Adjunct wasn't thinking in those terms. Too soon. Wrong woman.

Throughout the fleet, officers had been reporting talk of mutiny among the soldiers – excepting, oddly enough, the marines, who never seemed capable of thinking past the next meal or game of Troughs. A succession of reports, delivered in increasingly nervous tones, and it had seemed the Adjunct was unwilling or unable to even so much as care.

*You can heal wounds of the flesh well enough, but it's the other ones that can bleed out a soul.*

After that night, Lostara Yil clung to a resentful Tavore like a damned tick. Commander's aide. She understood the role. In the absence of actual direction from her commander, Lostara Yil assumed the task of managing nearly eight thousand miserable soldiers. The first necessity was clearing up

the matter of pay. The fleet was making sail for Theft, a paltry kingdom torn to tatters by Malazan incursions and civil war. Supplies needed to be purchased, but more than that, the soldiers needed leave and for that there must be not only coin but the promise of more to come, lest the entire army disappear into the back streets of the first port of call.

The army's chests could not feed what was owed.

So Lostara hunted down Banaschar, the once-priest of D'rek. Hunted him down and cornered him. And all at once, those treasury chests were overflowing.

*Now, why Banaschar? How did Lostara know?*

*Grub, of course. That scrawny runt climbing the rigging with those not-quite-right bhok'aral – I ain't once seen him come down, no matter how brutal the weather.* Yet Grub somehow knew about Banaschar's hidden purse, and somehow got the word to Lostara Yil.

The Fourteenth Army was suddenly rich. Too much handed out all at once would have been disastrous, but Lostara knew that. Enough that it be seen, that the rumours were let loose to scamper like stoats through every ship in the fleet.

Soldiers being what they were, it wasn't long before they were griping about something else, and this time the Adjunct's aide could do nothing to give answer.

*Where in Hood's name are we going?*

*Are we still an army and if we are, who are we fighting for?* The notion of becoming mercenaries did not sit well, it turned out.

The story went that Lostara Yil had it out with Tavore one night in the Adjunct's cabin. A night of screams, curses and, maybe, tears. Or something else happened. Something as simple as Lostara wearing her commander down, like D'rek's own soldier worms gnawing the ankles of the earth, *snap snick right through*. Whatever the details, the Adjunct was . . . awakened. The entire Fourteenth was days from falling to pieces.

A call was issued for the Fists and officers ranking captain and higher to assemble on the *Froth Wolf*. And, to the astonishment of everyone, Tavore Paran appeared on deck and delivered a *speech*. Sinn and Banaschar were present, and through sorcery the Adjunct's words were heard by everyone, even crew high in the riggings and crow's nests.

A Hood-damned speech.

From Tavore. Tighter-lipped than a cat at Togg's teats, but she talked. Not long, not complicated. And there was no brilliance, no genius. It was plain, every word picked up from dusty ground, strung together on a chewed thong, not even spat on to bring out a gleam. Not a precious stone to be found. No pearls, no opals, no sapphires.

*Raw garnet at best.*

*At best.*

Tied to Tavore's sword belt, there had been a finger bone. Yellowed, charred at one end. She stood in silence for a time, her plain features looking drawn, aged, her eyes dull as smudged slate. When at last she spoke, her voice was low, strangely measured, devoid of all emotion.

Blistig could still remember every word.

'There have been armies. Burdened with names, the legacy of meetings, of battles, of betrayals. The history behind the name is each army's secret language – one that no-one else can understand, much less share. The First Sword of Dassem Ultor – the Plains of Unta, the Grissian Hills, Li Heng, Y'Ghatan. The Bridgeburners – Raraku, Black Dog, Mott Wood, Pale, Black Coral. Coltaine's Seventh – Gelor Ridge, Vathar Crossing and the Day of Pure Blood, Sanimon, the Fall.

'Some of you share a few of those – with comrades now fallen, now dust. They are, for you, the cracked vessels of your grief and your pride. And you cannot stand in one place for long, lest the ground turn to depthless mud around your feet.' Her eyes fell then, a heartbeat, another, before she looked up once more, scanning the array of sombre faces before her.

'Among us, among the Bonehunters, our secret language has begun. Cruel in its birth at Aren, sordid in a river of old blood. Coltaine's blood. You know this. I need tell you none of this. We have our own Raraku. We have our own Y'Ghatan. We have Malaz City.

'In the civil war on Theft, a warlord who captured a rival's army then destroyed them – not by slaughter; no, he simply gave the order that each soldier's weapon hand lose its index finger. The maimed soldiers were then sent back to the warlord's rival. Twelve thousand useless men and women. To feed, to send home, to swallow the bitter taste of defeat. I was . . . I was reminded of that story, not long ago.'

*Yes*, Blistig thought then, *and I think I know by whom. Gods, we all do.*

'We too are maimed. In our hearts. Each of you knows this.

'And so we carry, tied to our belts, a piece of bone. Legacy of a severed finger. And yes, we cannot help but know bitterness.' She paused, held back for a long moment, and it seemed the silence itself grated in his skull.

Tavore resumed. 'The Bonehunters will speak in our secret language. We sail to add another name to our burden, and it may be it will prove our last. I do not believe so, but there are clouds before the face of the future – we cannot see. We cannot know.

'The island of Sepik, a protectorate of the Malazan Empire, is now empty of human life. Sentenced to senseless slaughter, every man, child and woman. We know the face of the slayer. We have seen the dark ships. We have seen the harsh magic unveiled.

'We are Malazan. We remain so, no matter the judgement of the Empress. Is this enough reason to give answer?

'No, it is not. Compassion is never enough. Nor is the hunger for vengeance. But, for now, for what awaits us, perhaps they will do. We are the Bonehunters, and sail to another name. Beyond Aren, beyond Raraku and beyond Y'Ghatan, we now cross the world to find the first name that will be truly our own. Shared by none other. We sail to give answer.

'There is more. But I will not speak of that beyond these words: *"What awaits you in the dusk of the old world's passing, shall go . . . unwitnessed."* T'amber's words.' Another long spell of pained silence.

'They are hard and well might they feed spite, if in weakness we permit such. But to those words I say this, as your commander: *we shall be our own witness, and that will be enough. It must be enough. It must ever be enough*.'

Even now, over a year later, Blistig wondered if she had said what was needed. In truth, he was not quite certain what she *had* said. The meaning of it. *Witnessed, unwitnessed, does it really make a difference?* But he knew the answer to that, even if he could not articulate precisely what it was he knew. Something stirred deep in the pit of his soul, as if his thoughts were black waters caressing unseen rocks, bending to shapes that even ignorance could not alter.

*Well, how can any of this make sense? I do not have the words.*

*But damn me, she did. Back then. She did.*

Unwitnessed. There was crime in that notion. A profound injustice against which he railed. *In silence. Like every other soldier in the Bonehunters. Maybe. No, I am not mistaken – I see something in their eyes. I can see it. We rail against injustice, yes. That what we do will be seen by no-one. Our fate unmeasured.*

*Tavore, what have you awakened? And, Hood take us, what makes you think we are equal to any of this?*

There had been no desertions. He did not understand. He didn't think he would ever understand. What had happened that night, what had happened in that strange speech.

*She told us we would never see our loved ones again. That is what she told us. Isn't it?*

*Leaving us with what?*

*With each other, I suppose.*

'We shall be our own witness.'

And was that enough?

*Maybe. So far.*

*But now we are here. We have arrived. The fleet, the fleet burns – gods, that she would do that. Not a single transport left. Burned, sunk to the bottom off this damned shore. We are . . . cut away.*

*Welcome, Bonehunters, to the empire of Lether.*

*Alas, we are not here in festive spirit.*

* * *

The treacherous ice was behind them now, the broken mountains that had filled the sea and clambered onto the Fent Reach, crushing everything on it to dust. No ruins to ponder over in some distant future, not a single sign of human existence left on that scraped rock. Ice was annihilation. It did not do what sand did, did not simply bury every trace. It was as the Jaghut had meant it: negation, a scouring down to bare rock.

Lostara Yil drew her fur-lined cloak tighter about herself as she followed the Adjunct to the forecastle deck of the *Froth Wolf.* The sheltered harbour was before them, a half-dozen ships anchored in the bay, including the *Silanda* – its heap of Tiste Andii heads hidden beneath thick tarpaulin. Getting the bone whistle from Gesler hadn't been easy, she recalled; and among the soldiers of the two squads left to command the haunted craft, the only one willing to use it had been that corporal, Deadsmell. Not even Sinn would touch it.

Before the splitting of the fleet there had been a flurry of shifting about among the squads and companies. The strategy for this war demanded certain adjustments, and, as was expected, few had been thrilled with the changes. *Soldiers are such conservative bastards.*

*But at least we pulled Blistig away from real command – worse than a rheumy old dog, that one.*

Lostara, still waiting for her commander to speak, turned for a glance back at the Throne of War blockading the mouth of the harbour. The last Perish ship in these waters, for now. She hoped it would be enough for what was to come.

'Where is Sergeant Cord's squad now?' the Adjunct asked.

'Northwest tip of the island,' Lostara replied. 'Sinn is keeping the ice away —'

'How?' Tavore demanded, not for the first time.

And Lostara could but give the same answer she had given countless times before. 'I don't know, Adjunct.' She hesitated, then added, 'Ebron believes that this ice is dying. A Jaghut ritual, crumbling. He notes the water lines on this island's cliffs – well past any earlier high water mark.'

To this the Adjunct said nothing. She seemed unaffected by the cold, damp wind, barring an absence of colour on her features, as if her blood had withdrawn from the surface of her flesh. Her hair was cut very short, as if to discard every hint of femininity.

'Grub says the world is drowning,' Lostara said.

Tavore turned slightly and looked up at the unlit shrouds high overhead. 'Grub. Another mystery,' she said.

'He seems able to communicate with the Nachts, which is, well, remarkable.'

'Communicate? It's become hard to tell them apart.'

The *Froth Wolf* was sidling past the anchored ships, angling towards the stone pier, on which stood two figures. Probably Sergeant Balm and Deadsmell.

Tavore said, 'Go below, Captain, and inform the others we are about to disembark.'

'Aye, sir.'

*Remain a soldier*, Lostara Yil told herself, a statement that whispered through her mind a hundred times a day. *Remain a soldier, and all the rest will go away.*

With dawn's first light paling the eastern sky, the mounted troop of Letherii thundered down the narrow coastal track, the berm of the old beach ridge on their left, the impenetrable, tangled forest on their right. The rain had dissolved into a clammy mist, strengthening the night's last grip of darkness, and the pounding of hoofs was oddly muted, quick to dwindle once the last rider was out of sight.

Puddles in the track settled once more, clouded with mud. The mists swirled, drifted into the trees.

An owl, perched high on a branch of a dead tree, had watched the troop pass. The echoes fading, it remained where it was, not moving, its large unblinking eyes fixed on a chaotic mass of shrubs and brambles amidst thin-boled poplars. Where something was not quite as it seemed. Unease sufficient to confuse its predatory mind.

The scrub blurred then, as if disintegrating in a fierce gale – although no wind stirred – and upon its vanishing, figures rose as if from nowhere.

The owl decided it would have to wait a little longer. While hungry, it nevertheless experienced a strange contentment, followed by a kind of tug on its mind, as of something . . . leaving.

Bottle rolled onto his back. 'Over thirty riders,' he said. 'Lancers, lightly armoured. Odd stirrups. Hood, but my skull aches. I hate Mockra—'

'Enough bitching,' Fiddler said as he watched his squad – barring a motionless Bottle – drawing in, with Gesler's doing the same beneath some trees a few paces away. 'You sure they didn't smell nothing?'

'Those first scouts nearly stepped right on us,' Bottle said.

'Something there . . . especially in one of them. As if he was somehow . . . I don't know, sensitized, I suppose. Him and this damned ugly coast where we don't belong—'

'Just answer the questions,' Fiddler cut in again.

'We should've ambushed the whole lot,' Koryk muttered, checking the knots on all the fetishes he was wearing, then dragging over his oversized supply pack to examine the straps.

Fiddler shook his head. 'No fighting until our feet dry. I hate that.'

'Then why are you a damned marine, Sergeant?'

'Accident. Besides, those were Letherii. We're to avoid contact with them, for now.'

'I'm hungry,' Bottle said. 'Well, no. It was the owl, dammit. Anyway, you would not believe what looking through an owl's eyes at night is like. Bright as noon in the desert.'

'Desert,' Tarr said. 'I miss the desert.'

'You'd miss a latrine pit if it was the last place you crawled out of,' Smiles observed. 'Koryk had his crossbow trained on those riders, Sergeant.'

'What are you, my little sister?' Koryk demanded. He then mimed Smiles's voice. 'He didn't shake his babymaker when he'd done peeing, Sergeant! I *saw* it!'

'See it?' Smiles laughed. 'I'd never get that close to you, half-blood, trust me.'

'She's getting better,' Cuttle said to Koryk, whose only response was a grunt.

'Quiet everyone,' Fiddler said. 'No telling who else lives in these woods – or might be using the road.'

'We're alone,' Bottle pronounced, slowly sitting up, then gripping the sides of his head. 'Hiding fourteen grunting, farting soldiers ain't easy. And once we get to more populated areas it's going to be worse.'

'Getting one miserable mage to shut his mouth is even harder,' Fiddler said. 'Check your gear, everyone. I want us a ways deeper into these woods before we dig in for the day.' For the past month on the ships the

Bonehunters had been shifting over into reversing their sleep cycles. A damned hard thing to do, as it turned out. But now at least pretty much everyone was done turning round. *Lost the tans, anyway.* Fiddler moved over to where Gesler crouched.

*Except this gold-skinned bastard and his hairy corporal.* 'Your people ready?'

Gesler nodded. 'Heavies are complaining their armour's gonna rust.'

'So long as they keep the squeaking to a minimum.' Fiddler glanced at the huddled soldiers of Gesler's squad, then back towards his own. 'Some army,' he said under his breath.

'Some invasion, aye,' Gesler agreed. 'Ever known anyone to do it this way?'

Fiddler shook his head. 'It makes a weird kind of sense, though, doesn't it? The Edur are spread thin, from all reports. The oppressed are legion – all these damned Letherii.'

'That troop just passed us didn't look much oppressed to me, Fid.'

'Well, I suppose we'll find out one way or the other, won't we? Now, let's get this invasion under way.'

'A moment,' Gesler said, settling a scarred hand on Fiddler's shoulder. 'She burned the fucking transports, Fid.'

The sergeant winced.

'Hard to miss the point of that, wouldn't you say?'

'Which meaning are you referring to, Gesler? The one about patrols on this coast seeing the flames or the one about for us there's no going back?'

'Hood take me, I can only chew on one piece of meat at a time, you know? Start with the first one. If I was this damned empire, I'd be flooding this coastline with soldiers before this day's sun is down. And no matter how much Mockra our squad mages now know, we're going to mess up. Sooner or later, Fid.'

'Would that be before or after we start drawing blood?'

'I ain't even thinking about once we start killing Hooddamned Tiste Edur. I'm thinking about today.'

'Someone stumbles onto us and we get nasty and dirty, then we bolt according to the plan.'

'And try to stay alive, aye. Great. And what if these Letherii ain't friendly?'

'We just keep going, and steal what we need.'

'We should've landed en masse, not just marines. With shields locked and see what they can throw at us.'

Fiddler rubbed at the back of his neck. Then sighed and said, 'You know what they can throw at us, Gesler. Only the next time, there won't be Quick Ben dancing in the air and matching them horror for horror. This is a night war we're looking at. Ambushes. Knives in the dark. Cut and bolt.'

'With no way out.'

'Aye. So I do wonder if she lit up our transports to tell 'em we're here, or to tell us there's no point in thinking about retreat. Or both.'

Gesler grunted. ' "Unwitnessed", she said. Is that where we are? Already?'

Shrugging, Fiddler half rose. 'Might be, Gesler. Let's get moving – the birds are twittering almost as loud as we are.'

But, as they tramped deeper into the wet, rotting forest, Gesler's last question haunted Fiddler. *Is he right, Adjunct? We there already?* Invading a damned empire in two-squad units. Running alone, unsupported, living or dying on the shoulders of a single squad mage. *What if Bottle gets killed in the first scrap? We're done for, that's what. Best keep Corabb nice and close to Bottle, and hope the old rebel's luck keeps pulling.*

At the very least, the waiting was over. Real ground underfoot – they'd all wobbled like drunks coming up from the strand, which might have been amusing in other circumstances. *But not when we could have staggered*

*right into a patrol.* Things were feeling solid now, though. Thank Hood. Well, as solid as one could be stumping over moss, overgrown sinkholes and twisted roots. *Almost as bad as Black Dog. No, don't think like that. Look ahead, Fid. Keep looking ahead.*

Somewhere above them, through a mad witch's weave of branches, the sky was lightening.

'Any more complainin' from any of you and I'll cut off my left tit.'

A half-circle of faces ogled her. Good. She was pleased with the way that always worked.

'Good thing the swim put you out,' Bowl said.

Sergeant Hellian frowned at the huge soldier. Put out? 'Heavies are idiots, you know that? Now.' She looked down and tried counting the number of rum casks she'd managed to drag from the hold before the flames went wild. Six, maybe ten. Nine. She waved at the blurry array. 'Everybody make room in your packs. For one each.'

Touchy Brethless said, 'Sergeant, ain't we supposed to find Urb and his squad? They gotta be close.' Then her corporal spoke again, this time in a different voice, 'He's right. Bowl, where'd you come from again? Up the shore or down it?'

'I don't remember. It was dark.'

'Hold on,' Hellian said, taking a sidestep to maintain her balance on the pitching deck. No, the pitching ground. 'You're not in my squad, Bowl. Go away.'

'I'd like nothing better,' he replied, squinting at the wall of trees surrounding them. 'I ain't carrying no cask of damned ale. Look at you, Sergeant, you're scorched all over.'

Hellian straightened. 'Now hold on, we're talking 'ssential victuals. But I'll tell you what's a lot worse. I bet that fire was seen by somebody – and I hope the fool that started it is a heap of ash right now, that's what I hope. Somebody's seen it, that's for sure.'

'Sergeant, they lit up *all* the transports,' said another one of her soldiers. Beard, thick chest, solid as a tree trunk and probably not much smarter either. What was his name?

'Who are you?'

The man rubbed at his eyes. 'Balgrid.'

'Right, Baldy, now try explaining to me how some fool swam from ship to ship and set them afire? Well? That's what I thought.'

'Someone's coming,' hissed the squad sapper.

The one with the stupid name. A name she always had trouble remembering. Could be? No. Sometimes? Unsure? *Ah, Maybe. Our sapper's name is Maybe. And his friend there, that's Lutes. And there's Tavos Pond – he's too tall. Tall soldiers get arrows in their foreheads. Why isn't he dead?* 'Anybody got a bow?' she asked.

A rustling of undergrowth, then two figures emerged from the gloom.

Hellian stared at the first one, feeling an inexplicable surge of rage. She rubbed thoughtfully at her jaw, trying to remember something about this sad-looking soldier. The rage drained away, was replaced with heartfelt affection.

Bowl stepped past her. 'Sergeant Urb, thank Hood you found us.'

'Urb?' Hellian asked, weaving as she moved closer and peered up into the man's round face. 'That you?'

'Found the rum, did you?'

Lutes said from behind her, 'She's poisoning her liver.'

'My liver's fine, soldier. Just needs a squeezing out.'

'Squeezing out?'

She turned round and glared at the squad healer. 'I seen livers before, Cutter. Big sponges full of blood. Tumbles out when you cut someone open.'

'Sounds more like a lung, Sergeant. The liver's this flat thing, muddy brown or purple—'

'Doesn't matter,' she said, wheeling back to stare at Urb. 'If the first one dies the other one kicks in. I'm fine. Well,' she added with a loud sigh which seemed to make Urb reel back a step, 'I'm in the best of moods, my friends. The best of moods. And now we're all together, so let's march because I'm pretty sure we're supposed to march somewhere.' She smiled over at her corporal. 'What say you, Touchy Brethless?'

'Sounds good, Sergeant.

'Brilliant plan, Sergeant.'

'Why do you always do that, Corporal?'

'Do what?

'Do what?'

'Look, Baldy's the one who's half deaf—'

'I'm not half deaf any more, Sergeant.'

'You're not? So who here is half deaf?'

'Nobody, Sergeant.'

'No need to shout. Baldy can hear you and if he can't then we should've left him on the boat, along with that tall one there with the arrow in his skull, because neither one's no good to us. We're looking for grey-skinned murderers and they're hiding in these trees. Behind them, I mean. If they were in them, it'd hurt. So we need to start looking behind all these trees. But first, collect us a cask here, one each now, and then we can get going.

'What're you all staring at? I'm the one giving the orders and I got me a new sword which will make chopping off one of these here tits a whole lot easier. Get moving, everyone, we got us a war to fight. Behind those trees.'

Crouched before him, Gullstream had the furtive look of a weasel in a chicken coop. He wiped his runny nose with the back of one forearm, squinted, then said, 'Everyone accounted for, sir.'

Fist Keneb nodded, then turned as someone slid loudly down the beach ridge. 'Quiet over there. All right, Gullstream, find the captain and send her to me.'

'Aye, sir.'

The soldiers were feeling exposed, which was understandable. It was one thing for a squad or two to scout ahead of a column – at least retreat was possible in the traditional sense. Here, if they got into trouble, their only way out was to scatter. As the commander of what would be a prolonged, chaotic engagement, Keneb was worried. His attack unit of six squads would be the hardest one to hide – the mages with him were the weakest of the lot, for the simple reason that his platoon would be holding back on their inland march, with the primary objective being avoiding any contact. As for the rest of his legion, it was now scattered up and down thirty leagues of coastline. Moving in small units of a dozen or so soldiers and about to begin a covert campaign that might last months.

There had been profound changes to the Fourteenth Army since Malaz City. A kind of standardization had been imposed on the scores of wizards, shamans, conjurers and casters in the legions, with the intent of establishing sorcery as the principal means of communication. And, for the squad mages among the marines – a force that now had as many heavy infantry as sappers – certain rituals of Mockra were now universally known. Illusions to affect camouflage, to swallow sound, confuse scent.

And all of this told Keneb one thing. *She knew. From the very beginning. She knew where we were going, and she planned for it.* Once again there had been no consultation among the officers. The Adjunct's only meetings were with that Meckros blacksmith and the Tiste Andii from Drift Avalii.

*What could they have told her about this land? None of them are even from here.*

He preferred to assume it was a simple stroke of fortune when the fleet had sighted two Edur ships that had been separated from the others following a storm. Too damaged to flee, they had been taken by the marines. Not easily – these Tiste Edur were fierce when cornered, even

when half-starved and dying of thirst. Officers had been captured, but only after every other damned warrior had been cut down.

The interrogation of those Edur officers had been bloody. Yet, for all the information they provided, it had been the ship's logs and charts that had proved the most useful for this strange campaign. *Ah, 'strange' is too mild a word for this. True, the Tiste Edur fleets clashed with our empire – or what used to be our empire – and they'd conducted wholesale slaughter of peoples under our nominal protection. But isn't all that Laseen's problem?*

The Adjunct would not relinquish her title, either. Adjunct to whom? The woman who had done all she could to try to murder her? What had happened that night up in Mock's Hold, anyway? The only other witnesses beyond Tavore and the Empress herself were dead. T'amber. Kalam Mekhar – *gods, that's a loss that will haunt us*. Keneb wondered then – and wondered still – if the entire debacle at Malaz City had not been planned out between Laseen and her cherished Adjunct. Each time this suspicion whispered through him, the same objections arose in his mind. *She would not have agreed to T'amber's murder. And Tavore damned near died at the harbour front. And what about Kalam?* Besides, even Tavore Paran was not cold enough to see the sacrifice of the Wickans, all to feed some damned lie. Was she?

*But Laseen's done this before. With Dujek Onearm and the Host. And that time, the deal involved the annihilation of the Bridgeburners – at least that's how it looks. So . . . why not?*

*What would have happened if we'd just marched into the city? Killing every damned fool who got in our way? If we'd gone in strength with Tavore up to Mock's Hold?*

Civil war. He knew that to be the answer to those questions. Nor could he see a way out, even after months and months of second-guessing.

No wonder, then, that all of this was eating at Keneb's guts, and he knew he was not alone in that. Blistig believed in nothing any more, beginning with himself. His eyes seemed to reflect some spectre of the future that only he could see. He walked as a man already dead – the body refusing what the

mind knew to be an irrevocable truth. And they'd lost Tene Baralta and his Red Blades, although perhaps that was not quite as tragic. *Well, come to think on it, Tavore's inner circle is pretty much gone. Carved out. Hood knows I never belonged there anyway – which is why I'm here, in this damned dripping swamp of a forest.*

'We're assembled and waiting, Fist.'

Blinking, Keneb saw that his captain had arrived. *Standing – waiting – how long?* He squinted up at the greying sky. *Shit*. 'Very well, we'll head inland until we find some dry ground.'

'Aye.'

'Oh, Captain, have you selected out the mage you want?'

Faradan Sort's eyes narrowed briefly, and in the colourless light the planes of her hard face looked more angular than ever. She sighed and said, 'I believe so, Fist. From Sergeant Gripe's squad. Beak.'

'Him? Are you sure?'

She shrugged. 'Nobody likes him, so you'll not rue the loss.'

Keneb felt a flicker of irritation. In a low tone he said, 'Your task is not meant to be a suicide mission, Captain. I am not entirely convinced this sorcerous communication system is going to work. And once the squads start losing mages, it will all fall apart. You will probably become the only link among all the units—'

'Once we find some horses,' she cut in.

'Correct.'

He watched as she studied him for a long moment, then she said, 'Beak has tracking skills, Fist. Of a sort. He says he can smell magic, which will help in finding our soldiers.'

'Very good. Now, it's time to move inland, Captain.'

'Aye, Fist.'

A short time later, the forty-odd soldiers of Keneb's command platoon were fighting their way through a bog of fetid, black water, as the day's heat grew. Insects swarmed in hungry clouds. Few words were exchanged.

*None of us are sure of this, are we? Find the Tiste Edur – this land's oppressors – and cut them down. Free the Letherii to rebel. Aye, foment a civil war, the very thing we fled the Malazan Empire to avoid.*

*Odd, isn't it, how we now deliver upon another nation what we would not have done to ourselves.*

*About as much moral high ground as this damned swamp. No, we're not happy, Adjunct. Not happy at all.*

Beak didn't know much about any of this. In fact, he would be the first to admit he didn't know much about anything at all, except maybe weaving sorcery. The one thing he knew for certain, however, was that no-one liked him.

Getting tied to the belt of this scary captain woman would probably turn out to be a bad idea. She reminded him of his mother, looks-wise, which should have killed quick any thoughts of the lustful kind. Should have, but didn't, which he found a little disturbing if he thought about it, which he didn't. Much. Unlike his mother, anyway, she wasn't the type to browbeat him at every turn, and that was refreshing.

'I was born a stupid boy to very rich noble-born parents.'

Usually the first words he uttered to everyone he met. The next ones were: 'That's why I became a soldier, so's I could be with my own kind.' Conversations usually died away shortly after that, which made Beak sad.

He would have liked to talk with the other squad mages, but even there it seemed he couldn't quite get across his deep-in-the-bone love of magic. 'Mystery,' he'd say, nodding and nodding, 'mystery, right? And poetry. That's sorcery. *Mystery and poetry*, which is what my mother used to say to my brother when she crawled into his bed on the nights Father was somewhere else. "We're living in mystery and poetry, my dear one," she'd say – I'd pretend I was asleep, since once I sat up and she beat me real bad.

Normally she never did that, with her fists I mean. Most of my tutors did that, so she wouldn't have to. But I sat up and that made her mad. The House healer said I almost died that night, and that's how I learned about poetry.'

The wonder that was sorcery was his greatest love, maybe his only one, so far, though he was sure he'd meet his perfect mate one day. A pretty woman as stupid as he was. In any case, the other mages usually just stared at him while he babbled on, which was what he did when getting nervous. On and on. Sometimes a mage would just up and hug him, then walk away. Once, a wizard he was talking to just started crying. That had frightened Beak.

The captain's interview of the mages in the platoon had ended with him, second in line.

'Where are you from, Beak, to have you so convinced you're stupid?'

He wasn't sure what that question meant, but he did try to answer. 'I was born in the great city of Quon on Quon Tali in the Malazan Empire, which is an empire ruled by a little Empress and is the most civilized place in the world. All my tutors called me stupid and they should know. Nobody didn't agree with them, either.'

'So who taught you about magic?'

'We had a Seti witch in charge of the stables. In the country estate. She said that for me sorcery was the lone candle in the darkness. The lone candle in the darkness. She said my brain had put out all the other candles, so this one would shine brighter and brighter. So she showed me magic, first the Seti way, which she knew best. But later, she always found other servants, other people who knew the other kinds. *Warrens.* That's what they're called. Different coloured candles for each and every one of them. Grey for Mockra, green for Ruse, white for Hood, yellow for Thyr, blue for —'

'You know how to use Mockra?'

'Yes. Want me to show you?'

'Not now. I need you to come with me – I am detaching you from your squad, Beak.'

'All right.'

'You and I, we are going to travel together, away from everyone else. We're going to ride from unit to unit, as best we can.'

'Ride, on horses?'

'Do you know how?'

'Quon horses are the finest horses in the world. We bred them. It was almost another candle in my head. But the witch said it was different, since I'd been born into it and riding was in my bones like writing in black ink.'

'Do you think you'll be able to find the other squads, even when they're using sorcery to hide themselves?'

'Find them? Of course. I smell magic. My candle flickers, then leans this way and whatever way the magic's coming from.'

'All right, Beak, you are now attached to Captain Faradan Sort. I've chosen you, over all the others.'

'All right.'

'Grab your gear and follow me.'

'How close?'

'Like you were tied to my sword-belt, Beak. Oh, and how old are you, by the way?'

'I've lost count. I was thirty but that was six years ago so I don't know any more.'

'The warrens, Beak – how many candles do you know about?'

'Oh, lots. All of them.'

'All of them.'

'We had a half-Fenn blacksmith for my last two years and he once asked me to list them, so I did, then he said that was all of them. He said: "That's all of them, Beak." '

'What else did he say?'

'Nothing much, only he made me this knife.' Beak tapped the large weapon at his hip. 'Then he told me to run away from home. Join the Malazan Army, so I wouldn't get beaten any more for being stupid. I was one year less than thirty when I did that, just like he told me to, and I haven't been beaten since. Nobody likes me but they don't hurt me. I didn't know the army would be so lonely.'

She was studying him the way most people did, then she asked, 'Beak, did you never use your sorcery to defend yourself, or fight back?'

'No.'

'Have you ever seen your parents or brother since?'

'My brother killed himself and my parents are dead – they died the night I left. So did the tutors.'

'What happened to them?'

'I'm not sure,' Beak admitted. 'Only, I showed them my candle.'

'Have you done that since, Beak? Showed your candle?'

'Not all of it, not all the light, no. The blacksmith told me not to, unless I had no choice.'

'Like that last night with your family and tutors.'

'Like that night, yes. They'd had the blacksmith whipped and driven off, you see, for giving me this knife. And then they tried to take it away from me. And all at once, I had no choice.'

So she said they were going away from the others, but here they were, trudging along with the rest, and the insects kept biting him, especially on the back of his neck, and getting stuck in his ears and up his nose, and he realized that he didn't understand anything.

But she was right there, right at his side.

The platoon reached a kind of island in the swamp, moated in black water. It was circular, and as they scrambled onto it Beak saw moss-covered rubble.

'Was a building here,' one of the soldiers said.

'Jaghut,' Beak called out, suddenly excited. 'Omtose Phellack. No flame, though, just the smell of tallow. The magic's all drained away and that's what made this swamp, but we can't stay here, because there's broken bodies under the rocks and those ghosts are hungry.'

They were all staring at him. He ducked his head. 'Sorry.'

But Captain Faradan Sort laid a hand on his shoulder. 'No need, Beak. These bodies – Jaghut?'

'No. Forkrul Assail and Tiste Liosan. They fought on the ruins. During what they called the Just Wars. Here, it was only a skirmish, but nobody survived. They killed each other, and the last warrior standing had a hole in her throat and she bled out right where the Fist is standing. She was Forkrul Assail, and her last thought was about how victory proved they were right and the enemy was wrong. Then she died.'

'It's the only dry land anywhere in sight,' Fist Keneb said. 'Can any mage here banish the ghosts? No? Hood's breath. Beak, what are they capable of doing to us anyway?'

'They'll eat into our brains and make us think terrible things, so that we all end up killing each other. That's the thing with the Just Wars – they never end and never will because Justice is a weak god with too many names. The Liosan called it Serkanos and the Assail called it Rynthan. Anyway, no matter what language it spoke, its followers could not understand it. A mystery language, which is why it has no power because all its followers believe the wrong things – things they just make up and nobody can agree and that's why the wars never end.' Beak paused, looking around at the blank faces, then he shrugged. 'I don't know, maybe if I talk to them. Summon one and we can talk to it.'

'I think not, Beak,' the Fist said. 'On your feet, soldiers, we're moving on.'

No-one complained.

Faradan Sort drew Beak to one side. 'We're leaving them now,' she said. 'Which direction do you think will get us out of this the quickest?'

Beak pointed north.

'How far?'

'A thousand paces. That's where the edge of the old Omtose Phellack is.'

She watched Keneb and his squads move down from the island, splashing their way further inland, due west. 'How long before they're out of this heading in that direction – heading west, I mean?'

'Maybe twelve hundred paces, if they stay out of the river.'

She grunted. 'Two hundred extra steps won't kill them. All right, Beak, north it is. Lead on.'

'Aye, Captain. We can use the old walkway.'

She laughed then. Beak had no idea why.

There was a sound in war that came during sieges, moments before an assault on the walls. The massed onagers, ballistae and catapults were let loose in a single salvo. The huge missiles striking the stone walls, the fortifications and the buildings raised a chaotic chorus of exploding stone and brick, shattered tiles and collapsing rooftops. The air itself seemed to shiver, as if recoiling from the violence.

Sergeant Cord stood on the promontory, leaning into the fierce, icy wind, and thought of that sound as he stared across at the churning bergs of ice warring across the strait. Like a city tumbling down, enormous sections looming over where Fent Reach used to be were splitting away, in momentary silence, until the waves of concussion rolled over the choppy waves of the sea, arriving in thunder. Roiling silver clouds, gouts of foamy water—

'A mountain range in its death-throes,' muttered Ebron at his side.

'War machines pounding a city wall,' Cord countered.

'A frozen storm,' said Limp behind them.

'You all have it wrong,' interjected Crump through chattering teeth. 'It's like big pieces of ice . . . falling down.'

'That's . . . simply stunning, Crump,' said Corporal Shard. 'You're a Hood-damned poet. I cannot believe the Mott Irregulars ever let you get away. No, truly, Crump. I cannot believe it.'

'Well, it's not like they had any choice,' the tall, knock-kneed sapper said, rubbing vigorously at both sides of his jaw before adding, 'I mean, I left when no-one was looking. I used a fish spine to pick the manacles – you can't arrest a High Marshal anyhow. I kept telling them. You can't. It's not allowed.'

Cord turned to his corporal. 'Any better luck at talking to your sister? Is she getting tired holding all this back? We can't tell. Widdershins doesn't even know how she's doing it in the first place, so he can't help.'

'Got no answers for you, Sergeant. She doesn't talk to me either. I don't know – she doesn't look tired, but she hardly sleeps any more anyway. There's not much I recognize in Sinn these days. Not since Y'Ghatan.'

Cord thought about this for a time, then he nodded. 'I'm sending Widdershins back. The Adjunct should be landing in the Fort by now.'

'She has,' said Ebron, pulling at his nose as if to confirm it hadn't frozen off. Like Widdershins, the squad mage had no idea how Sinn was managing to fend off mountains of ice. A bad jolt to his confidence, and it showed. 'The harbour's blocked, the thug in charge is contained. Everything is going as planned.'

A grunt from Limp. 'Glad you're not the superstitious type, Ebron. As for me, I'm getting down off this spine before I slip and blow a knee.'

Shard laughed. 'You're just about due, Limp.'

'Thanks, Corporal. I really do appreciate your concern.'

'Concern is right. I got five imperials on you living up to your name before the month's out.'

'Bastard.'

'Shard,' Cord said after they'd watched – with some amusement – Limp gingerly retreat from the promontory, 'where is Sinn now?'

'In that old lighthouse,' the corporal replied.

'All right. Let's get under some cover ourselves – there's more freezing rain on the way.'

'That's just it,' Ebron said in sudden anger. 'She's not just holding the ice back, Sergeant. She's *killing* it. And the water's rising and rising fast.'

'Thought it was all dying anyway.'

'Aye, Sergeant. But she's quickened that up – she just took apart that Omtose Phellack like reeds from a broken basket – but she didn't throw 'em away, no, she's weaving *something else*.'

Cord glared at his mage. 'Sinn ain't the only one not talking. What do you mean by "something else"?'

'I don't know! Hood's balls, I don't!'

'There's no baskets over there,' Crump said. 'Not that I can see. Marsh pigs, you got good eyes, Ebron. Even when I squint with one eye, I don't see—'

'That's enough, Sapper,' Cord cut in. He studied Ebron for a moment longer, then turned away. 'Come on, I got a block of ice between my legs and that's the warmest part of me.'

They headed down towards the fisher's shack they used as their base.

'You should get rid of it, Sergeant,' Crump said.

'What?'

'That block of ice. Or use your hands, at least.'

'Thanks, Crump, but I ain't that desperate yet.'

It had been a comfortable life, all things considered. True, Malaz City was hardly a jewel of the empire, but at least it wasn't likely to fall apart and sink in a storm. And he'd had no real complaints about the company he kept. Coop's had its assortment of fools, enough to make Withal feel as if he belonged.

Braven Tooth. Temper. Banaschar – and at least Banaschar was here, the one familiar face beyond a trio of Nachts and, of course, his wife. *Of course. Her.* And though an Elder God had told him to wait, the Meckros blacksmith would have been content to see that waiting last for ever. *Damn the gods, anyway, with their constant meddling, they way they just use us. As they like.*

Even after what had to be a year spent on the same ship as the Adjunct, Withal could not claim to know her. True, there had been that prolonged period of grief – Tavore's lover had been killed in Malaz City, he'd been told – and the Adjunct had seemed, for a time, like a woman more dead than alive.

If she was now back to herself, then, well, her self wasn't much.

The gods didn't care. They'd decided to use her as much as they had used him. He could see it, that bleak awareness in her unremarkable eyes. And if she had decided to stand against them, then she stood alone.

*I would never have the courage for that. Not even close. But maybe, to do what she's doing, she has to make herself less than human. More than human?* Choosing to be less to be more, perhaps. So many here might see her as surrounded by allies. Allies such as Withal himself, Banaschar, Sandalath, Sinn and Keneb. But he knew better. *We all watch. Waiting. Wondering.*

*Undecided.*

*Is this what you wanted, Mael? To deliver me to her? Yes, she was who I was waiting for.*

Leading, inevitably, to that most perplexing question: *But why me?*

True, he could tell her of the sword. His sword. The tool he had hammered and pounded into life for the Crippled God. But there was no answering that weapon.

Yet the Adjunct was undeterred. Choosing a war not even her soldiers wanted. With the aim of bringing down an empire. And the Emperor who held that sword in his hands. An Emperor driven mad by his own power. Another tool of the gods.

It was hard to feel easy about all this. Hard to find any confidence in the Adjunct's bold decision. The marines had been flung onto the Letherii shore, not a single landing en masse, in strength, but one scattered, clandestine, at night. Then, as if to defy the tactic, the transports had been set aflame.

An announcement to be sure.

*We are here. Find us, if you dare. But be assured, in time we will find you.*

While most of another legion remained in ships well off the Letherii coast. And the Adjunct alone knew where the Khundryl had gone. And most of the Perish.

'You have taken to brooding, husband.'

Withal slowly lifted his head and regarded the onyx-skinned woman sitting opposite him in the cabin. 'I am a man of deep thoughts,' he said.

'You're a lazy toad trapped in a pit of self-obsession.'

'That, too.'

'We will soon be ashore. I would have thought you'd be eager at the gunnel, given all your groaning and moaning. Mother Dark knows, I would never have known you for a Meckros with your abiding hatred of the sea.'

'Abiding hatred, is it? No, more like . . . frustration.' He lifted his huge hands. 'Repairing ships is a speciality. But it's not mine. I need to be back doing what I do best, wife.'

'Horseshoes?'

'Precisely.'

'Shield-rims? Dagger-hilts? Swords?'

'If need be.'

'Armies always drag smiths with them.'

'Not my speciality.'

'Rubbish. You can fold iron into a blade as well as any weaponsmith.'

'Seen plenty of 'em, have you?'

'With a life as long as mine has been, I've seen too much of everything. Now, our young miserable charges are probably down in the hold again. Will you get them or will I?'

'Is it truly time to leave?'

'I think the Adjunct is already off.'

'You go. They still make my skin crawl.'

She rose. 'You lack sympathy, which is characteristic of self-obsession. These Tiste Andii are young, Withal. Abandoned first by Anomander Rake. Then by Andarist. Brothers and sisters fallen in pointless battle. Too many losses – they are caught in the fragility of the world, in the despair it delivers to their souls.'

'Privilege of the young, to wallow in world-weary cynicism.'

'Unlike your deep thoughts.'

'Completely unlike my deep thoughts, Sand.'

'You think they have not earned that privilege?'

He could sense her growing ire. She was, after all, no less Tiste Andii than they were. Some things needed steering around. *Volcanic island. Floating mountain of ice. Sea of fire. And Sandalath Drukorlat's list of sensitivities.* 'I suppose they have,' he replied carefully. 'But since when was cynicism a virtue? Besides, it gets damned tiring.'

'No argument there,' she said in a deadly tone, then turned and marched out.

'Brooding's different,' he muttered to the empty chair across from him. 'Could be any subject, for one thing. A subject not at all cynical. Like the meddling of the gods – no, all right, not like that one. Smithing, yes. Horseshoes. Nothing cynical about horseshoes . . . I don't think. Sure. Keeping horses comfortable. So they can gallop into battle and die horribly.' He fell silent. Scowling.

* * *

Phaed's flat, heart-shaped face was the colour of smudged slate, a hue unfortunate in its lifelessness. Her eyes were flat, except when filled with venom, which they were now as they rested on Sandalath Drukorlat's back as the older woman spoke to the others.

Nimander Golit could see the young woman he called his sister from the corner of his eye, and he wondered yet again at the source of Phaed's unquenchable malice, which had been there, as far as he could recall, from her very earliest days. Empathy did not exist within her, and in its absence something cold now thrived, promising a kind of brutal glee at every victory, real or imagined, obvious or subtle.

There was nothing easy in this young, beautiful woman. It began with the very first impression a stranger had upon seeing her, a kind of natural glamour that could take one's breath away. The perfection of art, the wordless language of the romantic.

This initial moment was short-lived. It usually died following the first polite query, which Phaed invariably met with cold silence. A silence that transformed that wordless language, dispelling all notions of romance, and filling the vast, prolonged absence of decorum with bald contempt.

Spite was reserved for those who saw her truly, and it was in these instances that Nimander felt a chill of premonition, for he knew that Phaed was capable of murder. Woe to the sharp observer who saw, unflinchingly, through to her soul – to that trembling knot of darkness veined with unimaginable fears – then chose to disguise nothing of that awareness.

Nimander had long since learned to affect a kind of innocence when with Phaed, quick with a relaxed smile which seemed to put her at ease. It was at these moments, alas, when she was wont to confide her cruel sentiments, whispering elaborate schemes of vengeance against a host of slights.

Sandalath Drukorlat was nothing if not perceptive, which was hardly surprising. She had lived centuries upon centuries. She had seen all manner of creatures, from the honourable to the demonic. It had not taken her long to decide towards which end of the spectrum Phaed belonged.

She had answered cold regard with her own; the contempt flung her way was like pebbles thrown at a warrior's shield, raising not even a scratch. And, most cutting riposte of all, she had displayed amusement at Phaed's mute histrionics, even unto overt mockery. These, then, were the deep wounds suppurating in Phaed's soul, delivered by the woman who now stood as a surrogate mother to them all.

And now, Nimander knew, heart-faced Phaed was planning matricide.

He admitted to his own doldrums – long periods of flat indifference – as if none of this was in fact worth thinking about. He had his private host of demons, after all, none of which seemed inclined to simply fade away. Unperturbed by the occasional neglect, they played on in their dark games, and the modest hoard of wealth that made up Nimander's life went back and forth, until the scales spun without surcease. Clashing discord and chaos to mark the triumphant cries, the hissed curses, the careless scattering of coin. He often felt numbed, deafened.

It may have been that these were the traits of the Tiste Andii. *Introverts devoid of introspection. Darkness in the blood. Chimerae, even unto ourselves.* He'd wanted to care about the throne they had been defending, the one that Andarist died for, and he had led his charges into that savage battle without hesitation. Perhaps, even, with true eagerness.

*Rush to death. The longer one lives, the less valued is that life. Why is that?*

But that would be introspection, wouldn't it? Too trying a task, pursuing such questions. Easier to simply follow the commands of others. Another

trait of his kind, this comfort in following? Yet who stood among the Tiste Andii as symbols of respect and awe? Not young warriors like Nimander Golit. Not wicked Phaed and her vile ambitions. *Anomander Rake, who walked away. Andarist, his brother, who did not. Silchas Ruin – ah, such a family!* Clearly unique among the brood of the Mother. They lived larger, then, in great drama. Lives tense and humming like bowstrings, the ferocity of truth in their every word, the hard, cruel exchanges that drove them apart when nothing else would. Not even Mother Dark's turning away. Their early lives were poems of epic grandeur. *And we? We are nothing. Softened, blunted, confused into obscurity. We have lost our simplicity, lost its purity. We are the Dark without mystery.*

Sandalath Drukorlat – who had lived in those ancient times and must grieve in her soul for the fallen Tiste Andii – now turned about and with a gesture beckoned the motley survivors of Drift Avalii to follow. Onto the deck – *'you have hair, Nimander, the colour of starlight'* – to look upon this squalid harbour town that would be their home for the *next little eternity*, to use Phaed's hissing words.

*'It used to be a prison, this island. Full of rapists and murderers.'* A sudden look into his eyes, as if seeking something, then she gave him a fleeting smile that was little more than a showing of teeth and said, *'A good place for murder.'*

Words that, millennia past, could have triggered a civil war or worse, the fury of Mother Dark herself. Words, then, that barely stirred the calm repose of Nimander's indifference.

*'You have hair, Nimander, the colour of—'* But the past was dead. *Drift Avalii. Our very own prison isle, where we learned about dying.*

*And the terrible price of following.*

*Where we learned that love does not belong in this world.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I took the stone bowl
in both hands
and poured out my time
onto the ground
drowning hapless insects
feeding the weeds
until the sun stood
looking down
and stole the stain.

Seeing in the vessel's cup
a thousand cracks
I looked back
the way I came
and saw a trail green
with memories lost
whoever made this bowl
was a fool but the greater
he who carried it.

*Stone Bowl*
Fisher kel Tath

The pitched sweep of ice had gone through successive thaws and freezes until its surface was pocked and sculpted like the colourless bark of some vast toppled tree. The wind, alternating between warm and cold, moaned a chorus of forlorn voices through this muricated surface, and it seemed to Hedge that with each crunching stamp of his boot, a lone cry was silenced for ever. The thought left him feeling morose, and this motley scatter of refuse dotting the plain of ice and granulated snow only made things worse.

Detritus of Jaghut lives, slowly rising like stones in a farmer's field. Mundane objects to bear witness to an entire people – if only he could make

sense of them, could somehow assemble together all these disparate pieces. Ghosts, he now believed, existed in a perpetually confused state, the way before them an endless vista strewn with meaningless dross – the truths of living were secrets, the physicality of facts for ever withheld. A ghost could reach but could not touch, could move this and that, but never be moved by them. Some essence of empathy had vanished – but no, empathy wasn't the right word. He could *feel*, after all. The way he used to, when he had been alive. Emotions swam waters both shallow and deep. Tactile empathy perhaps was closer to the sense he sought. The comfort of mutual resistance.

He had willed himself this shape, this body in which he now dwelt, walking heavily alongside the withered, animate carcass that was Emroth. And it seemed he could conjure a kind of physical continuity with everything around him – like the crunching of his feet – but he now wondered if that continuity was a delusion, as if in picking up this curved shell of some ancient broken pot just ahead of him he was not in truth picking up *its* ghost. But for that revelation his eyes were blind, the senses of touch and sound were deceits, and he was as lost as an echo.

They continued trudging across this plateau, beneath deep blue skies where stars glittered high in the vault directly overhead, a world of ice seemingly without end.

The scree of garbage accompanied them on all sides.

Fragments of cloth or clothing or perhaps tapestry, potsherds, eating utensils, arcane tools of wood or ground stone, the piece of a musical instrument that involved strings and raised finger-drums, the splintered leg of a wooden chair or stool. No weapons, not in days, and the one they had discovered early on – a spear shaft – had been Imass.

Jaghut had died on this ice. Slaughtered. Emroth had said as much. But there were no bodies, and there had been no explanation forthcoming from the T'lan Imass. Collected then, Hedge surmised, perhaps by a survivor. Did the Jaghut practise ritual interment? He had no idea. In all his travels, he could not once recall talk of a Jaghut tomb or burial ground. If they did such things, they kept them to themselves.

But when they died here, they had been on the run. Some of those swaths of material were from tents. Flesh and blood Imass did not pursue them – not across this lifeless ice. No, they must have been T'lan. Of the Ritual. *Like Emroth here.*

'So,' Hedge said, his own voice startlingly loud in his ears, 'were you involved in this hunt, Emroth?'

'I cannot be certain,' she replied after a long moment. 'It is possible.'

'One scene of slaughter looks pretty much the same as the next, right?'

'Yes. That is true.'

Her agreement left him feeling even more depressed.

'There is something ahead,' the T'lan Imass said. 'We are, I believe, about to discover the answer to the mystery.'

'What mystery?'

'The absence of bodies.'

'Oh, that mystery.'

Night came abruptly to this place, like the snuffing out of a candle. The sun, which circled just above the horizon through the day, would suddenly tumble, like a rolling ball, beneath the gleaming, blood-hued skyline. And the black sky would fill with stars that only faded with the coming of strangely coloured brushstrokes of light, spanning the vault, that hissed like sprinkled fragments of fine glass.

Hedge sensed that night was close, as the wind's pockets of warmth grew more infrequent, the ember cast to what he assumed was west deepening into a shade both lurid and baleful.

He could now see what had caught Emroth's attention. A hump on the plateau, ringed in dark objects. The shape rising from the centre of that hillock at first looked like a spar of ice, but as they neared, Hedge saw that its core was dark, and that darkness reached down to the ground.

The objects surrounding the rise were cloth-swaddled bodies, many of them pitifully small.

As the day's light suddenly dropped away, night announced on a gust of chill wind, Hedge and Emroth halted just before the hump.

The upthrust spar was in fact a throne of ice, and on it sat the frozen corpse of a male Jaghut. Mummified by cold and desiccating winds, it nevertheless presented an imposing if ghastly figure, a figure of domination, the head tilted slightly downward, as if surveying a ring of permanently supine subjects.

'Death observing death,' Hedge muttered. 'How damned appropriate. He collected the bodies, then sat down and just died with them. Gave up. No thoughts of vengeance, no dreams of resurrection. Here's your dread enemy, Emroth.'

'More than you realize,' the T'lan Imass replied.

She moved on, edging round the edifice, her hide-wrapped feet plunging through the crust of brittle ice in small sparkling puffs of powdery snow.

Hedge stared up at the Jaghut on his half-melted throne. *All thrones should be made of ice, I think.*

*Sit on that numb arse, sinking down and down, with the puddle of dissolution getting ever wider around you. Sit, dear ruler, and tell me all your grand designs.*

Of course, the throne wasn't the only thing falling apart up there. The Jaghut's green, leathery skin had sloughed away on the forehead, revealing sickly bone, almost luminescent in the gloom; and on the points of the shoulders the skin was frayed, with the polished knobs of the shoulder bones showing through. Similar gleams from the knuckles of both hands where they rested on the now-tilted arms of the chair.

Hedge's gaze returned to the face. Black, sunken pits for eyes, a nose broad and smashed flat, tusks of black silver. *I thought these things never quite died. Needed big rocks on them to keep them from getting back up. Or chopped to pieces and every piece planted under a boulder.*

*I didn't think they died this way at all.*

He shook himself and set off after Emroth.

They would walk through the night. Camps, meals and sleeping were for still-breathing folk, after all.

'Emroth!'

The head creaked round.

'That damned thing back there's not still alive, is it?'

'No. The spirit left.'

'Just . . . left?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't that, uh, unusual?'

'The Throne of Ice was dying. Is dying still. There was – is – nothing left to rule, ghost. Would you have him sit there for ever?' She did not seem inclined to await a reply, for she then said, 'I have not been here before, Hedge of the Bridgeburners. For I would have known.'

'Known what, Emroth?'

'I have never before seen the true Throne of Ice, in the heart of the Hold. The very heart of the Jaghut realm.'

Hedge glanced back. *The true Throne of Ice?* 'Who – who was he, Emroth?'

But she did not give answer.

After a time, however, he thought he knew. Had always known.

He kicked aside a broken pot, watched it skid, roll, then wobble to a halt. *King on your melting throne, you drew a breath, then let it go. And . . . never again. Simple. Easy. When you are the last of your kind, and you release that last breath, then it is the breath of extinction. And it rides the wind.*

*Every wind.*

'Emroth, there was a scholar in Malaz City – a miserable old bastard named Obo – who claimed he was witness to the death of a star. And when the charts were compared again, against the night sky, well, one light was gone.'

'The stars have changed since my mortal life, ghost.'

'Some have gone out?'

'Yes.'

'As in . . . *died*?'

'The Bonecasters could not agree on this,' she said. 'Another observation offered a different possibility. The stars are moving away from us, Hedge of the Bridgeburners. Perhaps those we no longer see have gone too far for our eyes.'

'Obo's star was pretty bright – wouldn't it have faded first, over a long time, before going out?'

'Perhaps both answers are true. Stars die. Stars move away.'

'So, did that Jaghut die, or did he move away?'

'Your question makes no sense.'

*Really?* Hedge barked a laugh. 'You're a damned bad liar, Emroth.'

'This,' she said, 'is not a perfect world.'

The swaths of colours sweeping overhead hissed softly, while around them the wind plucked at tufts of cloth and fur, moaning through miniature gullies and caverns of ice, and closer still, a sound shared by ghost and T'lan Imass, the crackling destruction of their footsteps across the plateau.

* * *

Onrack knelt beside the stream, plunging his hands into the icy water, then lifting them clear again to watch the runnels trickling down. The wonder

had not left his dark brown eyes since his transformation, since the miracle of a life regained.

A man could have no heart if he felt nothing watching this rebirth, this innocent joy in a savage warrior who had been dead a hundred thousand years. He picked up polished stones as if they were treasure, ran blunt, calloused fingertips across swaths of lichen and moss, brought to his heavy lips a discarded antler to taste with his tongue, to draw in its burnt-hair scent. Walking through the thorny brush of some arctic rose, Onrack had then halted, with a cry of astonishment, upon seeing red scratches on his bowed shins.

The Imass was, Trull Sengar reminded himself yet again, nothing – *nothing* – like what he would have imagined him to be. Virtually hairless everywhere barring the brown, almost black mane sweeping down past his broad shoulders. In the days since they had come to this strange realm, a beard had begun, thin along Onrack's jawline and above his mouth, the bristles wide-spaced and black as a boar's; but not growing at all on the cheeks, or the neck. The features of the face were broad and flat, dominated by a flaring nose with a pronounced bridge, like a knuckle bone between the wide-spaced, deeply inset eyes. The heavy ridge over those eyes was made all the more robust by the sparseness of the eyebrows.

Although not particularly tall, Onrack nevertheless seemed huge. Ropy muscles bound to thick bone, the arms elongated, the hands wide but the fingers stubby. The legs were disproportionately short, bowed so that the knees were almost as far out to the sides as his hips. Yet Onrack moved with lithe stealth, furtive as prey, eyes flicking in every direction, head tilting, nostrils flaring as he picked up scents on the wind. Prey, yet now he needed to satisfy a prodigious appetite, and when Onrack hunted, it was with discipline, a single-mindedness that was fierce to witness.

This world was his, in every way. A blend of tundra to the north and a treeline in the south that reached up every now and then to the very shadow of the huge glaciers stretching down the valleys. The forest was a confused mix of deciduous and coniferous trees, broken with ravines and tumbled

rocks, springs of clean water and boggy sinkholes. The branches swarmed with birds, their incessant chatter at times overwhelming all else.

Along the edges there were trails. Caribou moved haphazardly between forest and tundra in their grazing. Closer to the ice, on higher ground where bedrock was exposed, there were goat-like creatures, scampering up ledges to look back down on the two-legged strangers passing through their domain.

Onrack had disappeared into the forest again and again in the first week of their wandering. Each time he reappeared his toolkit had expanded. A wooden shaft, the point of which he hardened in the fire of their camp; vines and reeds from which he fashioned snares, and nets that he then attached to the other end of the spear, displaying impressive skill at trapping birds on the wing.

From the small mammals caught in his nightly snares he assembled skins and gut. With the stomachs and intestines of hares he made floats for the weighted nets he strung across streams, and from the grayling and sturgeon harvested he gathered numerous spines which he then used to sew together the hides, fashioning a bag. He collected charcoal and tree sap, lichens, mosses, tubers, feathers and small pouches of animal fat, all of which went into the hide bag.

But all of these things were as nothing when compared with the burgeoning of the man himself. A face Trull had known only as dried skin taut over shattered bone was now animate with expression, and it was as if Trull had been blind to his friend in the time before, when even vocal inflection had been flat and lifeless.

Onrack now *smiled*. A sudden lighting of genuine pleasure that not only took Trull's breath away – and, he admitted, often filled his eyes with tears – but could silence Quick Ben as well, the wizard's dark face suddenly evincing ineffable wonder, an expression that a well-meaning adult might have upon seeing a child at play.

Everything about this Imass invited friendship, as if his smile alone cast some sorcery, a geas of charm, to which unquestioning loyalty was the only

possible response. This glamour Trull Sengar had no interest in resisting. *Onrack, after all, is the one brother I chose.* But the Tiste Edur could see, on occasion, the gleam of suspicion in the Malazan wizard, as if Quick Ben was catching himself at the edge of some inner precipice, some slide into a place Ben could not, by his very nature, wholly trust.

Trull felt no worry; he could see that Onrack was not interested in manipulating his companions. His was a spirit contained within itself, a spirit that had emerged from a haunted place and was haunted no longer. *Dead in a demonic nightmare. Reborn into a paradise. Onrack, my friend, you are redeemed, and you know it, with every sense – with your touch, your vision, with the scents of the land and the songs in the trees.*

The previous evening he had returned from a trip into the forest with a sheath of bark in his hands. On it were nuggets of crumbly yellow ochre. Later, beside the fire, while Quick Ben cooked the remaining meat from a small deer Onrack had killed in the forest two days previously, the Imass ground the nuggets into powder. Then, using spit and grease, he made a yellow paste. As he worked these preparations, he hummed a song, a droning, vibrating cadence that was as much nasal as vocal. The range, like his speaking voice, was unearthly. It seemed capable of carrying two distinct tones, one high and the other deep. The song ended when the task was done. There was a long pause; then, as Onrack began applying the paint to his face, neck and arms, a different song emerged, this one with a rapid beat, fast as the heart of a fleeing beast.

When the last daub of paint marked his amber skin, the song stopped.

'Gods below!' Quick Ben had gasped, one hand on his chest. 'My heart's about to pound right through my cage of bones, Onrack!'

The Imass, settling back in his cross-legged position, regarded the wizard with calm, dark eyes. 'You have been pursued often. In your life.'

A grimace from Quick Ben, then he nodded. 'Feels like years and years of that.'

'There are two names to the song. Agkor Raella and Allish Raella. The wolf song, and the caribou song.'

'Ah, so my cud-chewing ways are exposed at last.'

Onrack smiled. 'One day, you must become the wolf.'

'Might be I already am,' Quick Ben said after a long moment. 'I've seen wolves – plenty of them around here, after all. Those long-legged ones with the smallish heads—'

'Ay.'

'Ay, right. And they're damned shy. I'd wager they don't go for the kill until the odds are well in their favour. The worst kind of gamblers, in fact. But very good at survival.'

'Shy,' Onrack said, nodding. 'Yet curious. The same pack follows us now for three days.'

'They enjoy scavenging your kills – let you take all the risks. Makes for a sweet deal.'

'Thus far,' Onrack said, 'there have been few risks.'

Quick Ben glanced over at Trull, then shook his head and said, 'That mountain sheep or whatever you call it not only charged you, Onrack, but it sent you flying. We thought it'd broken every bone in your body, and you just two days into your new one at that.'

'The bigger the prey, the more you must pay,' Onrack said, smiling again. 'In the way of gambling, yes?'

'Absolutely,' the wizard said, prodding at the meat on the spit. 'My point was, the wolf is the caribou until necessity forces otherwise. If the odds are too bad, the wolf runs. It's a matter of timing, of choosing the right moment to turn round and hold your ground. As for those wolves tracking us, well, I'd guess they've never seen our kind before—'

'No, Quick Ben,' Onrack said. 'The very opposite is true.'

Trull studied his friend for a moment, then asked, 'We're not alone here?'

'The ay knew to follow us. Yes, they are curious, but they are also clever, and they remember. They have followed Imass before.' He lifted his head

and sniffed loudly. 'They are close tonight, those ay. Drawn to my song, which they have heard before. The ay know, you see, that tomorrow I will hunt dangerous prey. And when the moment of the kill comes, well, we shall see.'

'Just how dangerous?' Trull asked, suddenly uneasy.

'There is a hunting cat, an emlava – we entered its territory today, for I found the scrapes of its claim, on stone and on wood. A male by the flavour of its piss. Today, the ay were more nervous than usual, for the cat will kill them at every opportunity, and it is a creature of ambush. But I have assured them with my song. I found Tog'tol – yellow ochre – after all.'

'So,' Quick Ben said, his eyes on the dripping meat above the flames, 'if your wolves know we are here, how about the cat?'

'He knows.'

'Well, that's just terrific, Onrack. I'm going to need some warrens close to hand all damned day, then. That happens to be exhausting, you know.'

'You need not worry with the sun overhead, wizard,' Onrack said. 'The cat hunts at night.'

'Hood's breath! Let's hope those wolves smell it before we do!'

'They won't,' the Imass replied with infuriating calm. 'In scenting its territory, the emlava saturates the air with its sign. Its own body scent is much weaker, freeing the beast to move wherever it will when inside its territory.'

'Why are dumb brutes so damned smart, anyway?'

'Why are us smart folk so often stupidly brutal, Quick Ben?' Trull asked.

'Stop trying to confuse me in my state of animal terror, Edur.'

An uneventful night passed and now, the following day, they walked yet further into the territory of the emlava. Halting at a stream in mid-morning, Onrack had knelt beside it to begin his ritual washing of hands. At least, Trull assumed it was a ritual, although it might well have been another of

those moments of breathless wonder that seemed to afflict Onrack – and no surprise there; Trull suspected he'd be staggering about for months after such a rebirth. *Of course, he does not think like us. I am much closer in my ways of thought to this human, Quick Ben, than I am to any Imass, dead or otherwise. How can that be?*

Onrack then rose and faced them, his spear in one hand, sword in the other. 'We are near the emlava's lair. Although he sleeps, he senses us. Tonight, he means to kill one of us. I shall now challenge his claim to this territory. If I fail, he may well leave you be, for he will feed on my flesh.'

But Quick Ben was shaking his head. 'You're not doing this alone, Onrack. Granted, I'm not entirely sure of how my sorcery will work in this place, but dammit, it's just a dumb cat, after all. A blinding flash of light, a loud sound—'

'And I will join you as well,' Trull Sengar said. 'We begin with spears, yes? I have fought enough wolves in my time. We will meet its charge with spears. Then, when it is wounded and crippled, we close with bladed weapons.'

Onrack studied them for a moment, then he smiled. 'I see that I will not dissuade you. Yet, for the fight itself, you must not interfere. I do not think I will fail, and you will see why before long.'

Trull and the wizard followed the Imass up the slope of an outwash fan that filled most of a crevasse, up among the lichen-clad, tilted and folded bedrock. Beyond this blackstone ledge rose a sheer wall of grey shale pocked with caves where sediments had eroded away beneath an endless torrent of glacial melt. The stream in which Onrack had plunged his hands earlier poured out from this cliff, forming a pool in one cavern that extended out to fill a basin before continuing downslope. To the right of this was another cave, triangular in shape, with one entire side formed by a collapse in the shale overburden. The flat ground before it was scattered with splintered bones.

As they skirted the pool Onrack suddenly halted, lifting a hand.

A massive shape now filled the cave mouth.

Three heartbeats later, the emlava emerged.

'Hood's breath,' Quick Ben whispered.

Trull had expected a hunting cat little different from a mountain lion – perhaps one of the black ones rumoured to live in the deeper forests of his homeland. The creature hulking into view, blinking sleep from its charcoal eyes, was the size of a plains brown bear. Its enormous upper canines projected down past its lower jaw, long as a huntsman's knife and polished the hue of amber. The head was broad and flat, the ears small and set far back. Behind the short neck, the emlava's shoulders were hunched, forming a kind of muscled hump. Its fur was striped, black barbs on deep grey, although its throat revealed a flash of white.

'Not quite built for speed, is it?'

Trull glanced over at Quick Ben, saw the wizard holding a dagger in one hand. 'We should get you a spear,' the Tiste Edur said.

'I'll take one of your spares – if you don't mind.'

Trull slipped the bound clutch from his shoulder and said, 'Take your pick.'

The emlava was studying them. Then it yawned and with that Onrack moved lightly forward in a half-crouch.

As he did so, pebbles scattered nearby and Trull turned. 'Well, it seems Onrack has allies in this after all.'

The wolves – *ay* in the Imass language – had appeared and were now closing on Onrack's position, heads lowered and eyes fixed on the huge cat.

The sudden arrival of seven wolves clearly displeased the emlava, for it then lowered itself until its chest brushed the ground, gathering its legs beneath it. The mouth opened again, and a deep hiss filled the air.

'We might as well get out of their way,' Quick Ben said, taking a step back with obvious relief.

'I wonder,' Trull said as he watched the momentary stand-off, 'if this is how domestication first began. Not banding together in a hunt for prey, but in an elimination of rival predators.'

Onrack had readied his spear, not to meet a charge, but to throw the weapon using a stone-weighted antler atlatl. The wolves to his either side had fanned out, edging closer with fangs bared.

'Not a growl to be heard,' Quick Ben said. 'Somehow that's more chilling.'

'Growls are to warn,' Trull replied. 'There is fear in growls, just as there is in that cat's hissing.'

The emlava's single lungful of breath finally whistled down into silence. It refilled its lungs and began again.

Onrack lunged forward, the spear darting from his hand.

Flinching back, the emlava screamed as the weapon drove deep into its chest, just to one side of the neck and beneath the clavicle. At that moment the wolves rushed in.

A mortal wound, however, was not enough to slow the cat as it lashed out with two staggered swings of its forepaws at one of the wolves. The first paw sank talons deep into the wolf's shoulder, snatching the entire animal closer, within the reach of the second paw, which dragged the yelping wolf closer still. The massive head then snapped down on its neck, fangs burying themselves in flesh and bone.

The emlava, lurching, then drove its full weight down on the dying wolf, probably breaking every bone in its body.

As it did so, four other wolves lunged for its soft belly, two to each side, their canines tearing deep, then pulling away as, screaming, the emlava spun round to fend them off.

Exposing its neck.

Onrack's sword flashed, point-first, into the cat's throat. It recoiled, sending one wolf tumbling, then reared back on its hind legs – as if to

wheel and flee back into its cave – but all strength left the emlava then. It toppled, thumped hard onto the ground, and was still.

The six remaining wolves – one limping – padded away, keeping a distance between themselves and the three men, and moments later were gone from sight.

Onrack walked up to the emlava and tugged free his gore-spattered spear. Then he knelt beside the cat's head.

'Asking forgiveness?' Quick Ben queried, his tone only slightly ironic.

The Imass looked over at them. 'No, that would be dishonest, wizard.'

'You're right, it would. I am glad you're not dumping any blessed spirit rubbish on us. It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that there were *wars* long before there were wars between people. You had your rival hunters to dispose of first.'

'Yes, that is true. And we found allies. If you wish to find irony, Quick Ben, know that we then hunted until most of our prey was extinct. And our allies then starved – those that did not surrender to our stewardship.'

'The Imass are hardly unique in that,' Trull Sengar said.

Quick Ben snorted. 'That's understating it, Trull. So tell us, Onrack, why are you kneeling beside that carcass?'

'I have made a mistake,' the Imass replied, climbing to his feet and staring into the cave.

'Seemed pretty flawless to me.'

'The killing, yes, Quick Ben. But this emlava, it is female.'

The wizard grunted, then seemed to flinch. 'You mean the male's still around?'

'I do not know. Sometimes they . . . wander.' Onrack looked down at the bloodied spear in his hands. 'My friends,' he said. 'I am now . . . hesitant, I admit. Perhaps, long ago, I would not have thought twice – as you said, wizard, we warred against our competitors. But this realm – it is a gift. All

that was lost, because of our thoughtless acts, now lives again. Here. I wonder, can things be different?'

In the silence following that question, they heard, coming from the cave, the first pitiful cry.

'Did you ever wish, Udinaas, that you could sink inside stone? Shake loose its vast memories—'

The ex-slave glanced at Wither – a deeper smear in the gloom – then sneered. 'And see what they have seen? You damned wraith, stones can't see.'

'True enough. Yet they swallow sound and bind it trapped inside. They hold conversations with heat and cold. Their skins wear away to the words of the wind and the lick of water. Darkness and light live in their flesh – and they carry within them the echoes of wounding, of breaking, of being cruelly shaped—'

'Oh, enough!' Udinaas snapped, pushing a stick further into the fire. 'Go melt away into these ruins, then.'

'You are the last one awake, my friend. And yes, I *have* been in these ruins.'

'Games like those are bound to drive you mad.'

A long pause. 'You know things you have no right to know.'

'How about this, then? Sinking into stone is easy. It's getting out again that's hard. You can get lost, trapped in the maze. And on all sides, all those memories pressing in, pressing down.'

'It is your dreams, isn't it? Where you learn such things. Who speaks to you? Tell me the name of this fell mentor!'

Udinaas laughed. 'You fool, Wither. My mentor? Why, none other than *imagination*.'

'I do not believe you.'

There seemed little point in responding to that declaration. Staring into the flames, Udinaas allowed its flickering dance to lull him. He was tired. He should be sleeping. The fever was gone, the nightmarish hallucinations, the strange nectars that fed the tumbling delusions all seeped away, *like piss in moss. The strength I felt in those other worlds was a lie. The clarity, a deceit. All those offered ways forward, through what will come, every one a dead end. I should have known better.*

'K'Chain Nah'ruk, these ruins.'

'You still here, Wither? Why?'

'This was once a plateau on which the Short-Tails built a city. But now, as you can see, it is shattered. Now there is nothing but these dread slabs all pitched and angled – yet we have been working our way downward. Did you sense this? We will soon reach the centre, the heart of this crater, and we will see what destroyed this place.'

'The ruins,' said Udinaas, 'remember cool shadow. Then concussion. Shadow, Wither, in a flood to announce the end of the world. The concussion, well, that belonged to the shadow, right?'

'You know things—'

'You damned fool, listen to me! We came to the edge of this place, this high plateau, expecting to see it stretch out nice and flat before us. Instead, it looks like a frozen puddle onto which someone dropped a heavy rock. *Splat.* All the sides caved inward. Wraith, I don't need any secret knowledge to work this out. Something big came down from the sky – a meteorite, a sky keep, whatever. We trudged through its ash for days. Covering the ancient snow. Ash and dust, eating into that snow like acid. And the ruins, they're all toppled, blasted outward, then tilted inward. Out first, in second. Heave out and down, then slide back. Wither, all it takes is for someone to just *look*. *Really look*. That's it. So enough with all this mystical sealshit, all right?'

His tirade had wakened the others. *Too bad. Nearly dawn anyway.* Udinaas listened to them moving around, heard a cough, then someone hawking spit. *Which? Seren? Kettle?* The ex-slave smiled to himself. 'Your

problem, Wither, is your damned expectations. You hounded me for months and months, and now you feel the need to have made it – me – worth all that attention. So here you are, pushing some kind of sage wisdom on this broken slave, but I told you then what I'll tell you now. I'm nothing, no-one. Understand? Just a man with a brain that, every now and then, actually works. Yes, I work it, because I find no comfort in being stupid. Unlike, I think, most people. Us Letherii, anyway. *Stupid and proud of it.* Belongs on the Imperial Seal, that happy proclamation. No wonder I failed so miserably.'

Seren Pedac moved into the firelight, crouching down to warm her hands. 'Failed at what, Udinaas?'

'Why, everything, Acquitor. No need for specifics here.'

Fear Sengar spoke from behind him. 'You were skilled, I recall, at mending nets.'

Udinaas did not turn round, but he smiled. 'Yes, I probably deserved that. My well-meaning tormentor speaks. Well-meaning? Oh, perhaps not. Indifferent? Possibly. Until, at least, I did something wrong. A badly mended net – aaii! Flay the fool's skin from his back! I know, it was all for my own good. Someone's, anyway.'

'Another sleepless night, Udinaas?'

He looked across the fire at Seren, but she was intent on the flames licking beneath her outstretched hands, as if the question had been rhetorical.

'I can see my bones,' she then said.

'They're not real bones,' Kettle replied, settling down with her legs drawn up. 'They look more like twigs.'

'Thank you, dear.'

'Bones are hard, like rock.' She set her hands on her knees and rubbed them. 'Cold rock.'

'Udinaas,' Seren said, 'I see puddles of gold in the ashes.'

'I found pieces of a picture frame.' He shrugged. 'Odd to think of K'Chain Nah'ruk hanging pictures, isn't it?'

Seren looked up, met his eyes. 'K'Chain—'

Silchas Ruin spoke as he stepped round a heap of cut stone. 'Not pictures. The frame was used to stretch skin. K'Chain moult until they reach adulthood. The skins were employed as parchment, for writing. The Nah'ruk were obsessive recorders.'

'You know a lot about creatures you killed on sight,' Fear Sengar said.

Clip's soft laughter sounded from somewhere beyond the circle of light, followed by the snap of rings on a chain.

Fear's head lifted sharply. 'That amuses you, pup?'

The Tiste Andii's voice drifted in, eerily disembodied. 'Silchas Ruin's dread secret. He parleyed with the Nah'ruk. There was this civil war going on, you see . . .'

'It will be light soon,' Silchas said, turning away.

Before too long, the group separated as it usually did. Striding well ahead were Silchas Ruin and Clip. Next on the path was Seren Pedac herself, while twenty or more paces behind her straggled Udinaas – still using the Imass spear as a walking stick – and Kettle and Fear Sengar.

Seren was not sure if she was deliberately inviting solitude upon herself. More likely some remnant of her old profession was exerting on her a disgruntled pressure to take the lead, deftly dismissing the presence ahead of the two Tiste warriors. *As if they don't count. As if they're intrinsically unreliable as guides . . . to wherever it is we're going.* She thought back, often, on their interminable flight from Letheras, the sheer chaos of that trek, its contradictions of direction and purpose; the times when they were motionless – setting down tentative roots in some backwater hamlet or abandoned homestead – but their exhaustion did not ease then, for it was not of blood and flesh. Scabandari Bloodeye's soul awaited them, like some enervating parasite, in a place long forgotten. Such was the stated purpose, but Seren had begun, at last, to wonder.

Silchas had endeavoured to lead them west, ever west, and was turned aside each time – as if whatever threat the servants of Rhulad and Hannan Mosag presented was too vast to challenge. And that made no sense. *The bastard can change into a damned dragon. And is Silchas a pacifist at heart? Hardly. He kills with all the compunction of a man swatting mosquitoes. Did he turn us away to spare our lives? Again, unlikely. A dragon doesn't leave behind anything alive, does it?* Driven north, again and again, away from the more populated areas.

To the very edge of Bluerose, a region once ruled by Tiste Andii – *hiding still under the noses of Letherii and Edur – no, I do not trust any of this. I cannot. Silchas Ruin sensed his kin. He must have.*

Suspecting Silchas Ruin of deceit was one thing, voicing the accusation quite another. She lacked the courage. As simple as that. *Easier, isn't it, to just go along, and to keep from thinking too hard. Because thinking too hard is what Udinaas has done, and look at the state he's in. Yet, even then, he's managing to keep his mouth shut. Most of the time. He may be an ex-slave, he may be 'no-one' – but he is not a fool.*

So she walked alone. Bound by friendship to none – none here, in any case – and disinclined to change that.

The ruined city, little more than heaps of tumbled stone, rolled past on all sides, the slope ahead becoming ever steeper, and she thought, after a time, that she could hear the whisper of sand, crumbled mortar, fragments of rubble, as if their passage was yet further pitching this landscape, and as they walked they gathered to them streams of sliding refuse. *As if our presence alone is enough shift the balance.* The whispering could have been voices, uttered beneath the wind, and she felt – with a sudden realization that lifted beads of sweat to her skin – within moments of understanding the words. *Of stone and broken mortar. I am sliding into madness indeed—*

*'When the stone breaks, every cry escapes. Can you hear me now, Seren Pedac?'*

'Is that you, Wither? Leave me be.'

*'Are any warrens alive? Most would say no. Impossible. They are forces. Aspects. Proclivities manifest as the predictable – oh, the Great Thinkers who are long since dust worried this in fevered need, as befits the obsessed. But they did not understand. One warren lies like a web over all the others, and its voice is the will necessary to shape magic. They did not see it. Not for what it was. They thought . . . chaos, a web where each strand was undifferentiated energy, not yet articulated, not yet given shape by an Elder God's intent.'*

She listened, as yet uncomprehending, even as her heart thundered in her chest and her each breath came in a harsh rasp. This, she knew, was not Wither's voice. Not the wraith's language. Not its cadence.

*'But K'rul understood. Spilled blood is lost blood, powerless blood in the end. It dies when abandoned. Witness violent death for proof of that. For the warrens to thrive, coursing in their appointed rivers and streams, there must be a living body, a grander form that exists in itself. Not chaos. Not Dark, nor Light. Not heat, not cold. No, a conscious aversion to disorder. Negation to and of all else, when all else is dead. For the true face of Death is dissolution, and in dissolution there is chaos until the last mote of energy ceases its wilful glow, its persistent abnegation. Do you understand?'*

'No. Who are you?'

*'There is another way, then, of seeing this. K'rul realized he could not do this alone. The sacrifice, the opening of his veins and arteries, would mean nothing, would indeed fail. Without living flesh, without organized functionality.*

*'Ah, the warrens, Seren Pedac, they are a dialogue. Do you see now?'*

'No!'

Her frustrated cry echoed through the ruins. She saw Silchas and Clip halt and turn about.

Behind her, Fear Sengar called out, 'Acquitor? What is it you deny?'

Knowing laughter from Udinaas.

*'Disregard the vicious crowd now, the torrent of sound overwhelming the warrens, the users, the guardians, the parasites and the hunters, the complicit gods elder and young. Shut them away, as Corlos taught you. To remember rape is to fold details into sensation, and so relive each time its terrible truth. He told you this could become habit, an addiction, until even despair became a welcome taste on your tongue. Understand, then – as only you can here – that to take one's own life is the final expression of despair. You saw that. Buruk the Pale. You felt that, at the sea's edge. Seren Pedac, K'rul could not act alone in this sacrifice, lest he fill every warren with despair.*

*'Dialogue. Presupposition, yes, of the plural. One with another. Or succession of others, for this dialogue must be ongoing, indeed, eternal.*

*'Do I speak of the Master of the Holds? The Master of the Deck? Perhaps – the face of the other is ever turned away – to all but K'rul himself. This is how it must be. The dialogue, then, is the feeding of power. Power unimaginable, power virtually omnipotent, unassailable . . . so long as that other's face remains ?turned away.*

*'From you. From me. From all of us.'*

She stared wildly about then, at these tilted ruins, this endless scree of destruction.

*'The dialogue, however, can be sensed if not heard – such is its power. The construction of language, the agreement in principle of meaning and intent, the rules of grammar – Seren Pedac, what did you think Mockra was? If not a game of grammar? Twisting semantics, turning inference, inviting suggestion, reshaping a mind's internal language to deceive its own senses?*

*'Who am I?*

*'Why, Seren Pedac, I am Mockra.'*

The others were gathered round her now. She found herself on her knees, driven there by revelation – there would be bruises, an appalling softness in the tissue where it pressed against hard pavestone. She registered this, as

she stared up at the others. Reproachful communication, between damaged flesh and her mind, between her senses and her brain.

She shunted those words aside, then settled into a sweet, painless calm.

As easy as that.

*'Beware, there is a deadly risk in deceiving oneself. You can blind yourself to your own damage. You can die quickly in that particular game, Seren Pedac. No, if you must . . . experiment . . . then choose another.*

*'Corlos would have showed you that, had he the time with you.'*

'So – so he knows you?'

*'Not as intimately as you. There are few so . . . blessed.'*

'But you are not a god, are you?'

*'You need not ask that, Seren Pedac.'*

'You are right. But still, you are *alive*.'

She heard amusement in the reply. *'Unless my greatest deceit is the announcement of my own existence! There are rules in language, and language is needed for the stating of the rules. As K'rul understood, the blood flows out, and then it returns. Weak, then enlivened. Round and round. Who then, ask yourself, who then is the enemy?'*

'I don't know.'

*'Not yet, perhaps. You will need to find out, however, Seren Pedac. Before we are through.'*

She smiled. 'You give me a purpose?'

*'Dialogue, my love, must not end.'*

'Ours? Or the other one?'

*'Your companions think you fevered now. Tell me, before we part, which you would choose. For your experiments?'*

She blinked up at the half-circle of faces. Expressions of concern, mockery, curiosity, indifference. 'I don't know,' she said. 'It seems . . . cruel.'

*'Power ever is, Seren Pedac.'*

'I won't decide, then. Not yet.'

*'So be it.'*

'Seren?' Kettle asked. 'What is wrong with you?'

She smiled, then pushed herself to her feet, Udinaas – to her astonishment – reaching out to help her regain her balance.

Seeing her wince, he half smiled. 'You landed hard, Acquitor. Can you walk?' His smile broadened. 'Perhaps no faster than the rest of us laggards, now?'

'You, Udinaas? No, I think not.'

He frowned. 'Just the two of us right now,' he said.

Her eyes flickered up to meet his, shied away, then returned again – hard. 'You heard?'

'Didn't need to,' he replied under his breath as he set the Imass walking stick into her hands. 'Had Wither sniffing at my heels long before I left the north.' He shrugged.

Silchas Ruin and Clip had already resumed the journey.

Leaning on the Imass spear, Seren Pedac walked alongside the ex-slave, struggling with a sudden flood of emotion for this broken man. *Perhaps, true comrades after all. He and I.*

'Seren Pedac.'

'Yes?'

'Stop shifting the pain in your knees into mine, will you?'

*Stop – what? Oh.*

'Either that or give me that damned stick back.'

'If I say "sorry" then, well . . .'

'You give it away. Well, say it if you mean it, and either way we'll leave it at that.'

'Sorry.'

His surprised glance delighted her.

The rising sea level had saturated the ground beneath the village. Anyone with half their wits would have moved to the stony, treed terrace bordering the flood plain, but the sordid remnants of the Shake dwelling here had simply levered their homes onto stilts and raised the slatted walkways, living above fetid, salty bog crawling with the white-backed crabs known as skullcaps.

Yan Tovis, Yedan Derryg and the troop of lancers reined in at Road's End, the ferry landing and its assorted buildings on their left, a mass of felled trees rotting into the ground on their right. The air was chill, colder than it should have been this late into spring, and tendrils of lowlying fog hid most of the salt marsh beneath the stilts and bridged walkways.

Among the outbuildings of the landing – all situated on higher ground – there was a stone-walled stable fronted by a courtyard of planed logs, and beyond that, facing the village, an inn without a name.

Dismounting, Yan Tovis stood beside her horse for a long moment, her eyes closing. *We have been invaded. I should be riding to every garrison on this coast – Errant fend, they must know by now. Truth delivered the hard way. The empire is at war.*

But she was now Queen of the Last Blood, Queen of the Shake. Opening her weary eyes she looked upon the decrepit fishing village. *My people, Errant help me.* Running away had made sense back then. It made even more sense now.

Beside her, Yedan Derryg, her half-brother, loosened the strap of his visored helm, then said, 'Twilight, what now?'

She glanced over at him, watched the rhythmic bunching of his bearded jaw. She understood the question in all its ramifications. *What now? Do the Shake proclaim their independence, rising eager in the chaos of a Malazan-Letherii war? Do we gather our arms, our young whom we would call soldiers? The Shake cry out their liberty, and the sound is devoured by the shore's rolling surf.*

She sighed. 'I was in command on the Reach, when the Edur came in their ships. We surrendered. I surrendered.'

*To do otherwise would have been suicidal.* Yedan should have said those words, then. For he knew the truth of them.

Instead, he seemed to chew again for a moment, before turning to squint at the flat, broad ferry. 'That's not slipped its mooring in some time, I think. The coast north of Awl must be flooded.'

*He gives me nothing.* 'We shall make use of it, all the way out to Third Maiden Fort.'

A nod.

'Before that, however, we must summon the witches and warlocks.'

'You'll find most of them huddled in the village yonder, Queen. And Pully and Skwish will have announced your return. Taloned toes are tapping the floorboards, I would wager.'

'Go down there,' she commanded, facing the inn. 'Escort them back here – I will be in the tavern.'

'And if the tavern is not big enough?'

An odd concern. She began walking towards the entrance. 'Then they can perch on shoulders like the crows they are, Yedan.'

'Twilight.'

She half turned.

Yedan was tightening the straps of his helm once again. 'Do not do it.'

'Do not do what?'

'Send us to war, sister.'

She studied him.

But he said nothing more, and a moment later he had turned away and set off down towards the village.

She resumed her walk, while her soldiers led the mounts towards the stable, the beasts' hoofs slipping on the slick logs of the courtyard. They had ridden hard, these last horses drawn from a virtually empty garrison fort just north of Tulamesh – reports of bandits had sent the squads into the countryside and they'd yet to return. Yan Tovis believed they would never do so.

At the entranceway she paused, looking down at the slab of stone beneath her boots, on which were carved Shake runes.

*'This Raised Stone honours Teyan Atovis, Rise, who was claimed by the Shore 1113th Year of the Isle. Slain by the Letherii for Debts Unremitted.'*

Yan Tovis grunted. One of her kin, no less, dead a thousand years now. 'Well, Teyan,' she muttered, 'you died of drink, and now your stone straddles the threshold of a tavern.' True, some list of mysterious, crushing debts had invited his ignoble fall to alcohol and misery, but this grand commemoration had taken a slanted view on the hands guiding the man's fate. And now . . . *Brullyg would be Rise. Will you wear the crown as well as Teyan did?*

She pushed open the door and strode inside.

The low-ceilinged room was crowded, every face turned to her.

A familiar figure pushed into view, her face a mass of wrinkles twisted into a half-smile.

'Pully,' Twilight said, nodding. 'I have just sent the Watch down to the village to find you.'

'Be well he'll find Skwish and a score others. They be well weaving cob to web on th' close sea beyond the shore, Queen, an' all the truths writ there. Strangers—'

'I know,' Yan Tovis interjected, looking past the old hag and scanning the other witches and warlocks, the Shoulderfolk of the Old Ways. Their eyes glittered in the smoky gloom, and Twilight could now smell these Shake elders – half-unravelled damp wool and patchy sealskin, fish-oil and rank sweat, the breath coming from mouths dark with sickened gums or rotting teeth.

If there was a proprietor to this tavern he or she had fled. Casks had been broached and tankards filled with pungent ale. A huge pot of fish soup steamed on the centre hearth and there were countless gourd-shell bowls scattered on the tables. Large rats waddled about on the filthy floor.

Far more witches than warlocks, she noted. This had been a discernible trend among the demon-kissed – fewer and fewer males born bearing the accepted number of traits; most were far too demonic. *More than two hundred of the Shoulderfolk. Gathered here.* 'Queen,' Pully ventured, ducking her head. 'Cob to web, all of Shake blood know that you now rule. Barring them that's on the Isle, who only know that your mother's dead.'

'So Brullyg is there, anticipating . . .'

'Aye, Twilight, that be well he will be Rise, King of the Shake.'

*Errant take me.* 'We must sail to the Isle.'

A murmur of agreement amidst the eager quaffing of ale.

'You intend, this night,' Yan Tovis said, 'a ritual.'

'We are loosening the chains as they say, Queen. There are nets be strung across the path of the world, t'see what we catch.'

'No.'

Pully's black eyes narrowed. 'What's that?'

'No. There will be no ritual tonight. Nor tomorrow night, nor the next. Not until we are on the Isle, and perhaps not even then.'

Not a sound in the tavern now.

Pully opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again.

'Queen, the shore be alive wi' voices as they say and the words they are for us. These – these they be the Old Ways, *our* ways—'

'And my mother was in the habit of looking away, yes. But I am not.' She lifted her head and scanned once more the array of faces, seeing the shock, the anger, the growing malice. 'The Old Ways failed us. Then and now. Your ways,' she told them in a hard voice, 'have failed us all. I am Queen. Twilight on the shore. At my side in my rule is the Watch. Brullyg would be Rise – that remains to be seen, for your proclamation is not cause enough, not even close. Rise is chosen by all the Shake. *All*.'

'*Do not mar us*, *Queen.*' Pully's smile was gone. Her face was a mask of venom.

Yan Tovis snorted. 'Will you send a curse my way, old woman? Do not even think it. I mean to see my people survive, through all that will happen. From all of you, I will need healing, I will need blessing. You rule no longer – no, do not speak to me of my mother. I know better than any of you the depths of her surrender. I am Queen. Obey me.'

They were not happy. They had been the true power for so long – if that pathetic curse-weaving in the shadows could be called power – and Yan Tovis knew that this struggle had but just begun, for all their apparent acquiescence. *They will begin planning my downfall. It is to be expected.*

*Yedan Derryg, never mind watching the shore. You must now watch my back.*

Fiddler opened his eyes. Dusk had just begun to settle. Groaning, he rolled onto his back. Too many years of sleeping on hard, cold ground; too many years of a tattered rain cape for a mattress, a single blanket of coarse wool for cover. At least now he was sleeping through the day, easing his old bones with the sun's warmth.

Sitting up, he looked round the glade. Huddled figures on all sides. Just beyond them was Koryk, the sleep's last watch, sitting on a tree stump. *Aye, woodcutters in this forest.*

*Not that we've seen any.*

Three nights since the landing. Ever moving eastward, inland. *A strange empire, this. Roads and tracks and the occasional farmstead, barely a handful of towns on the coast that we saw. And where in Hood's name are these Tiste Edur?*

Fiddler climbed to his feet, arching his back to work out the aches and twinges. He'd wanted to be a soldier named Strings, here among the Bonehunters, a different man, a new man. But that hadn't worked so well. The conceit had fooled no-one. Even worse, he could not convince himself that he had begun anew, that the legacy of past campaigns could be put aside. *A life don't work that way. Dammit.* He trudged over to Koryk.

The Seti half-blood glanced up. 'Some damned war we got ourselves here, Sergeant. I'd even take one of Smiles's knives in the leg just to get us the smell of blood. Let's forget these damned Edur and go ahead and start killing Letherii.'

'Farmers and swineherds, Koryk? We need them on our side, remember?'

'So far there ain't been enough of them to muster a damned squad. Least we should show ourselves—'

'Not yet. Besides, it's probably been just bad luck we haven't met the enemy yet. I'd wager other squads have already been in a scrap or two.'

Koryk grunted. 'I doubt it. All it takes is just one squad to kick the nest and these woods should be swarming. They ain't.'

Fiddler had nothing to say to that. He scratched himself, then turned away. 'Shut your eyes for a time now, soldier.

We'll wake you when breakfast's ready.'

*Do your complainin' now, Koryk, because when this lets loose we'll look back on sunsets like this one like it was idyllic paradise.* Still, how many

times could he make that promise? The legacy of the Bonehunters thus far was nothing to sing songs about. Even Y'Ghatan had been a mess, with them whistling a song while they walked right into a trap. It galled him still, that one. He should have smelled trouble. Same for Gesler – *aye, we let them down that day. Badly.*

Malaz City had been worse. True, weapons had been drawn. There'd even been a shield-line for a few squads of marines. *Against Malazans. An undisciplined mob of our own people.* Somehow, somewhere, this army needed to fight for real.

The Adjunct had thrown them onto this coast, like a handful of ticks onto a dog's back. Sooner or later the beast was going to scratch.

As the others wakened to the coming of night, Fiddler walked over to his pack. Stood studying it for a time. The Deck was in there, waiting. And he was sorely tempted. Just to get a taste of what was coming. *Don't be a fool, Fid. Remember Tattersail. Remember all the good it did her.*

'Bad idea, Sergeant.'

Fiddler glanced over, scowled. 'Stop reading my mind, Bottle. You're not as good at it as you think.'

'You're like a man who's sworn off drink but carries a flask in his pouch.'

'Enough of that, soldier.'

Bottle shrugged, looked round. 'Where's Gesler gone?'

'Probably off fertilizing the trees.'

'Maybe,' Bottle said, sounding unconvinced. 'It's just that I woke up earlier, and didn't see him then either.'

*Gods below.* Waving at midges, Fiddler walked over to the far end of the glade, where the other squad was positioned. He saw Stormy standing like a sleep-addled bear – his red hair and beard a wild mass of twig-filled tangles – repeatedly kicking the side of a loudly snoring Shortnose.

'Stormy,' Fiddler called out softly, 'where's your sergeant gone to?'

'No idea,' the huge man replied. 'He had last watch on this side, though. Hey, Fid, she wouldn't have burned the *Silanda*, would she?'

'Of course not. Listen, if Gesler ain't back soon you're going to have to go looking for him.'

Stormy's small porcine eyes blinked at him. 'Might be he's lost? I didn't think of that.'

'Never mind that dimwitted act, Corporal.'

'Yeah. That Koryk you got, he any good at tracking?'

'No. Damned near useless in fact, although don't say that to his face. Bottle—'

'Oh, him. That one gives me the creeps, Fid. Masturbates like I pick my nose. Now sure, soldiers will do that, but—'

'He says it's not him.'

'Well, if Smiles wants to reach in under the covers—'

'Smiles? What are you going on about, Stormy?'

'I mean—'

'Look, Bottle's haunted by a damned ghost of some kind – Quick Ben confirmed it, so stop giving me that look. Anyway, that ghost's, uh, female, and she likes him way too much—'

'Mages are sick, Fid.'

'Not a relevant point here, Stormy.'

'So you say,' the corporal said, shaking himself then turning away. ' *"Not a relevant point here,"* ' he mimicked under his breath.

'I can still hear you, Corporal.'

Stormy waved a wide, hairy hand but did not turn round, instead making his way towards the hearth. He paused in his first step to set his boot down on one of Shortnose's hands. There was an audible crack and the heavy

infantryman made a small sound, then sat up. Stormy continued on, while Shortnose looked down at his hand, frowning at the oddly angled third finger, which he then reset with a tug, before rising and wandering off to find somewhere to empty his bladder.

Fiddler scratched at his beard, then swung about and walked back to his squad.

*Aye, we're a lethal bunch.*

Gesler wandered the strange ruins. The light was fast fading, making the place seem even more spectral. Round wells on all sides, at least a dozen scattered among the old trees. The stones were exquisitely cut, fitted without mortar – as he had discovered upon peeling back some moss. He had caught sight of the regular shapes from the edge of the glade, had first thought them to be the pedestals for some colonnaded structure long since toppled over. But the only other stone he found was paving, buckled by roots, making footing treacherous.

Seating himself on the edge of one of the wells, he peered down into the inky blackness, and could smell stagnant water. He felt oddly pleased with himself to find that his curiosity had not been as thoroughly dulled as he'd once believed. Not nearly as bad as, say, Cuttle. Now there was a grim bastard. Still, Gesler had seen a lot in his life, and some of it had permanently stained his skin – not to mention other, more subtle changes. But mostly that host of things witnessed, deeds done, not done, they just wore a man down.

He could not look at the tiny flames of the squad's hearth without remembering Truth and that fearless plunge into Y'Ghatan's palace. Or he'd glance down at the crossbow in his hands as they stumbled through this damned forest and recall Pella, skewered through the forehead, sagging against the corner of a building barely a hundred paces into Y'Ghatan itself. With every crow's cackle he heard the echoes of the screams when dread ghosts had assailed the camp of the Dogslayers at Raraku. A glance down at his bared hands and their battered knuckles, and the vision rose in his mind of that Wickan, Coltaine, down on the banks of the Vathar – *gods, to have*

*led that mob that far, with more still to go, with nothing but cruel betrayal at the Fall.*

The slaughter of the inhabitants of Aren, when the Logros T'lan Imass rose from the dust of the streets and their weapons of stone began to rise and fall, rise and fall. If not for that ex-Red Blade driving open the gates and so opening a path of escape, there would have been no survivors at all. None. *Except us Malazans, who could only stand aside and watch the slaughter. Helpless as babes . . .*

A dragon through fire, a ship riding flames – his first sight of a Tiste Edur: dead, pinned to his chair by a giant's spear. Oar benches where sat decapitated rowers, hands resting on the sweeps, and their severed heads heaped in a pile round the mainmast, eyes blinking in the sudden light, faces twisting into appalling expressions—

*So who built twelve wells in a forest? That's what I want to know.*

*Maybe.*

He recalled a knock at the door, and opening it to see, with absurd delight, a drenched T'lan Imass whom he recognized. *Stormy, it's for you. And aye, I dream of moments like this, you red-haired ox.* And what did that say about Gesler himself? *Wait, I'm not that curious.*

'There you are.'

Gesler looked up. 'Stormy. I was just thinking of you.'

'Thinking what?'

He waved at the well's black hole. 'If you'd fit, of course. Most of you would go, but not, alas, your head.'

'You keep forgetting, Gesler,' the corporal said as he drew nearer, 'I was one of the ones who punched back.'

'Got no recollection of that at all.'

'Want me to remind you?'

'What I want is to know why you're bothering me.'

'We're all gettin' ready to head out.'

'Stormy.'

'What?'

'What do you think about all this?'

'Someone liked building wells.'

'Not this. I mean, the war. This war, the one here.'

'I'll let you know once we start busting heads.'

'And if that never happens?'

Stormy shrugged, ran thick fingers through his knotted beard. 'Just another typical Bonehunter war, then.'

Gesler grunted. 'Go on, lead the way. Wait. How many battles have we fought, you and me?'

'You mean, with each other?'

'No, you damned idiot. I mean against other people. How many?'

'I lost count.'

'Liar.'

'All right. Thirty-seven, but not counting Y'Ghatan since I wasn't there. Thirty-eight for you, Gesler.'

'And how many did we manage to avoid?'

'Hundreds.'

'So maybe, old friend, we're just getting better at this.'

The huge Falari scowled. 'You trying to ruin my day, Sergeant?'

Koryk tightened the straps of his bulky pack. 'I just want to kill someone,' he growled.

Bottle rubbed at his face then eyed the half-blood Seti. 'There's always Smiles. Or Tarr, if you jump him when he's not looking.'

'You being funny?'

'No, just trying to deflect your attention from the weakest guy in this squad. Namely, me.'

'You're a mage. Sort of. You smell like one, anyway.'

'What does that mean?'

'If I kill you, you'd just curse me with your last breath, then I'd be miserable.'

'So what would change, Koryk?'

'Having a reason to be miserable is always worse than having no reason but being miserable anyway. If it's just a way of life, I mean.' He suddenly drew out the latest weapon in his arsenal, a long-knife. 'See this? Just like the kind Kalam used. It's a damned fast weapon, but I can't see it doing much against armour.'

'Where Kalam stuck them there wasn't no armour. Throat, armpit, crotch – you should give it to Smiles.'

'I grabbed it to *keep* it from her, idiot.'

Bottle looked over to where Smiles had, moments earlier, disappeared into the forest. She was on her way back, the placid expression on her face hiding all sorts of evil, no doubt. 'I hope we're not expected to stand against Edur the way heavies are,' he said to Koryk while watching Smiles. 'Apart from you and Tarr, and maybe Corabb, we're not a big mailed fist kind of squad, are we? So, in a way, this kind of war suits us – subterfuge, covert stuff.' He glanced over and saw the half-blood glaring at him. Still holding the long-knife. 'But maybe we're actually more versatile. We can be half mailed fist and half black glove, right?'

'Anyway,' Koryk said, resheathing the weapon, 'when I said I wanted to kill someone I meant the enemy.'

'Tiste Edur.'

'Letherii bandits will do – there must be bandits around here somewhere.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean, why? There's always bandits in the countryside, Bottle. Led by moustached rogues with fancy names. Zorala Snicker, or Pamby Doughty—'

A loud snort from Smiles, who had just arrived. 'I remember those stories. Pamby Doughty with the feather in his hat and his hunchback sidekick, Pomolo Paltry the Sly. Stealers of the Royal Treasure of Li Heng. Cutters of the Great Rope that held Drift Avalii in one place. And Zorala, who as a child climbed the tallest tree in the forest, then found he couldn't get back down, so that's where he lived for years, growing up. Until the woodsman came—'

'Gods below,' Cuttle growled from the blankets he remained under, 'someone cut her throat, please.'

'Well,' Smiles said with a tight, eponymous curve of her mouth, 'at least I started the night in a good mood.'

'She means she had a most satisfying—'

'Clack the teeth together, Koryk, or I'll cut those braids off when you're sleeping and trust me, you won't like what I'll use 'em for. And you, Bottle, don't let that give you any ideas, neither. I took the blame for something you did once, but never again.'

'I wouldn't cut off Koryk's braids,' Bottle said. 'He needs them to sneeze into.'

'Get moving, Cuttle,' Fiddler said as he strode among them. 'Look at Corabb – he's the only one actually ready—'

'No I'm not,' the man replied. 'I just fell asleep in my armour, Sergeant, and now I need somewhere to pee. Only—'

'Never mind,' Fiddler cut in. 'Let's see if we can't stumble onto some Edur tonight.'

'We could start a forest fire,' Koryk said.

'But we happen to be in it,' Tarr pointed out.

'It was just an idea.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas admitted to himself that these Malazans were nothing like the soldiers of the Dogslayers, or the warriors of Leoman's army. He was not even sure if they were human. More like . . . animals. Endlessly bickering ones at that, like a pack of starving dogs.

They pretty much ignored him, which was a good thing. Even Bottle, to whom the sergeant had instructed Corabb to stay close. Guarding someone else's back was something Corabb was familiar with, so he had no issue with that command. Even though Bottle was a mage and he wasn't too sure about mages. They made deals with gods – but one didn't have to be a mage to do that, he knew. No, one could be a most trusted leader, a commander whose warriors would follow him into the pit of the Abyss itself. Even someone like that could make deals with gods, and so doom his every follower in a fiery cataclysm even as that one ran away.

Yes, ran away.

He was pleased that he had got over all that. Old history, and old history was old so it didn't mean anything any more, because . . . well, because it was old. He had a new history, now. It had begun in the rubble beneath Y'Ghatan. Among these . . . animals. Still, there was Fiddler and Corabb knew he would follow his sergeant because the man was worth following. Not like some people.

An army of fourteen seemed a little small, but it would have to do for now. He hoped, however, that somewhere ahead – further inland – they'd come to a desert. Too many trees in this wet, bad-smelling forest. And he'd like to get on a horse again, too. All this walking was, he was certain, unhealthy.

As the squad left the glade, slipping into the deeper darkness beyond, he moved alongside Bottle, who glanced over and grimaced. 'Here to protect me from bats, Corabb?'

The warrior shrugged. 'If they try attacking you I will kill them.'

'Don't you dare. I happen to like bats. I talk to them, in fact.'

'The same as that rat and her pups you kept, right?'

'Exactly.'

'I was surprised, Bottle, that you left them to burn on the transports.'

'I'd never do that. I shipped them onto the *Froth Wolf*. Some time ago, in fact—'

'So you could spy on the Adjunct, yes.'

'It was an act of mercy – the one ship I knew would be safe, you see—'

'And so you could spy.'

'All right, fine. So I could spy. Let's move on to another subject. Did Leoman ever tell you about his bargain with the Queen of Dreams?'

Corabb scowled. 'I don't like that subject. It's *old history*, which means nobody talks about it any more.'

'Fine, so why didn't you go with him? I'm sure he offered.'

'I will kill the next bat I see.'

Someone hissed from up ahead: '*Stop that jabbering, idiots!* '

Corabb wished he was riding a fine horse, across a sun-blistered desert – no-one could truly understand the magic wonder of water, unless they had spent time in a desert. Here, there was so much of it a man's feet could rot off and that wasn't right. 'This land is mad,' he muttered.

Bottle grunted. 'More like deathless. Layer on layer, ghosts tangled in every root, squirming restlessly under every stone. Owls can see them, you know. Poor things.'

Another hiss from ahead of them.

It started to rain.

*Even the sky holds water in contempt. Madness.*

Trantalo Kendar, youngest son among four brothers in a coastal clan of the Beneda Tiste Edur, rode with surprising grace, unmatched by any of his Edur companions, alas. He was the only one in his troop who actually liked horses. Trantalo had been a raw fifteen years of age at the conquest, unblooded, and the closest he had come to fighting had been as an apprentice to a distantly related aunt who had served as a healer in Hannan Mosag's army.

Under her bitter command, he had seen the terrible damage war did to otherwise healthy warriors. The ghastly wounds, the suppurating burns and limbs withered from Letherii sorcery. And, walking the fields of battle in search of the wounded, he had seen the same horrid destruction among dead and dying Letherii soldiers.

Although young, something of the eagerness for battle had left him then, driving him apart from his friends. Too many spilled out intestines, too many crushed skulls, too many desperate pleas for help answered by naught but crows and gulls. He had bound countless wounds, had stared into the glazed eyes of warriors shocked by their own mortality, or, worse, despairing with the misery of lost limbs, scarred faces, lost futures.

He did not count himself clever, nor in any other way exceptional – barring, perhaps, his talent for riding horses – but he now rode with eleven veteran Edur warriors, four of them Beneda, including the troop commander, Estav Kendar, Trantalo's eldest brother. And he was proud to be at the column's head, first down this coastal track that led to Boaral Keep, where, as he understood it, some sort of Letherii impropriety demanded Edur attention.

This was as far south from Rennis as he had been since managing to flee his aunt's clutches just inland of the city of Awl. Trantalo had not seen the walls of Letheras, nor the battlefields surrounding it, and for that he was

glad, for he had heard that the sorcery in those final clashes had been the most horrifying of them all.

Life in Rennis had been one of strange privilege. To be Tiste Edur alone seemed sufficient reason for both fear and respect among the subservient Letherii. He had exulted in the respect. The fear had dismayed him, but he was not so naive as not to understand that without that fear, there would be none of the respect that so pleased him. *'The threat of reprisal,'* Estav had told him the first week of his arrival. *'This is what keeps the pathetic creatures cowering. And there will be times, young brother, when we shall have to remind them – bloodily – of that threat.'*

Seeking to tug down his elation was the apprehension that this journey, down to this in-the-middle-of-nowhere keep, was just that – the delivery of reprisal. Blood-splashed adjudication. It was no wonder the Letherii strove to keep the Edur out of such disputes. *We are not interested in niceties. Details bore us. And so swords will be drawn, probably this very night.*

Estav would make no special demands of him, he knew. It was enough that he rode point on the journey. Once at the keep, Trantalo suspected he would be stationed to guard the gate or some such thing. He was more than satisfied with that.

The sun's light was fast fading on the narrow track leading to the keep. They had a short time earlier left the main coastal road, and here on this lesser path the banks were steep, almost chest-high were one standing rather than riding, and braided with dangling roots. The trees pressed in close from both sides, branches almost entwining overhead. Rounding a twist in the trail, Trantalo caught first sight of the stockade, the rough boles – still bearing most of their bark – irregularly tilted and sunken. A half-dozen decrepit outbuildings crouched against a stand of alders and birch to the left and a flatbed wagon with a broken axle squatted in high grasses just to the right of the gate.

Trantalo drew rein before the entrance. The gate was open. The single door, made of saplings and a Z-shaped frame of planks, had been pushed well to one side and left there, its base snarled with grasses. The warrior could see through to the compound beyond, oddly lifeless. Hearing his

fellow Edur draw closer at the canter, he edged his horse forward until he made out the smoke-stained façade of the keep itself. No lights from any of the vertical slit windows. And the front door yawned wide.

'Why do you hesitate, Trantalo?' Estav inquired as he rode up.

'Preda,' Trantalo said, delighting, as ever, in these new Letherii titles, 'the keep appears to be abandoned. Perhaps we have ridden to the wrong one—'

'Boaral,' affirmed a warrior behind Estav. 'I've been here before.'

'And is it always this quiet?' Estav asked, one brow lifting in the way Trantalo knew so well.

'Nearly,' the warrior said, rising gingerly on the swivelling Letherii stirrups to look round. 'There should be at least two torches, one planted above that wagon – then one in the courtyard itself.'

'No guards?'

'Should be at least one – could be he's staggered off to the latrine trench —'

'No,' said Estav, 'there's no-one here.' He worked his horse past Trantalo's and rode through the gate.

Trantalo followed.

The two brothers approached the stepped front entrance to the keep.

'Estav, something wet on those stairs.'

'You're right. Good eye, brother.' The Beneda warrior dismounted with obvious relief, passing the reins over to Trantalo, then strode towards the steps. 'Blood-trail.'

'Perhaps a mutiny?'

The other Edur had left their horses with one of their company and were now moving out across the courtyard to search the stables, smithy, coop and well-house.

Estav stood at the base of the steps, eyes on the ground. 'A body has been dragged outside,' he said, tracking the blood-trail.

Trantalo saw his brother's head lift to face the stable. As it did Estav grunted suddenly, then abruptly sat down.

'Estav?'

Trantalo looked out to the courtyard, in time to see four warriors crumple. Sudden shouts from the three near the stables, as something like a rock sailed down into their midst.

A flash of fire. A solid, *cracking* sound. The three were thrown onto their backs. As a small cloud bloomed, there was shrieking.

Trantalo kicked his boots free of the stirrups, swung one leg over then dropped down into a crouch. His mouth was dry as tinder. His heart pounded so hard in his chest he felt half deafened by its drumbeat. Drawing his sword, he hurried over to his brother.

'Estav?'

Sitting, legs out before him in the careless manner of a child, hands resting on the muddy ground. Something was jutting from his chest. A hand's length of a shaft, thicker than a normal arrow, the fletching curved fins of leather. Blood had poured down from Estav's mouth, covering his chin and soaking into the front of his woollen cloak. His staring eyes did not blink.

'*Estav?* '

In the courtyard, the sharp clash of blades.

Disbelieving, Trantalo dragged his eyes from his brother's corpse. Two Edur warriors were attempting a fighting withdrawal, backing towards the uneasy horses that still stood five or so paces in from the gate. The Edur who had been left with them was on his hands and knees, crawling for the opening. There was something jutting from the side of his head.

Difficult to make out who the attackers were in the darkness, but they were well armed and armoured, four in all, maintaining close contact with

the last two Edur.

Smudged movement behind them – Trantalo leapt to his feet, about to cry out a warning, when sudden fire filled his throat. Gagging, he lurched away and felt something cold slide out from the side of his neck. Blood gushed down, inside and out. Coughing, drowning, he fell to one knee, almost within reach of his brother. Blindness closing in, he lunged towards Estav, arms outstretched.

*Estav?*

He never made it.

* * *

Managing a straight line, Hellian walked out from the stable. She was slightly shivering, now that the time of serious sweating had passed. Fighting always evened her out. She didn't know why that was the case, but it was and all in all probably a good thing, too. 'Someone light a damned lantern,' she growled. 'You, Maybe, put that sharper away – we got 'em all.' She let out a loud sigh. 'The big nasty enemy.'

Drawing nearer the two Edur down in front of the keep, she waved her sword. 'Tavos, check those two. It ain't enough to stab 'im then just stand there looking down. Might be one last bite in 'im, you know.'

'Both dead as my sex-life,' Tavos Pond said. 'Who sniped the first one, Sergeant? Damned fine shot.'

'Lutes,' she replied, now watching Urb lead the others on a walk-past of the Edur bodies in the courtyard. 'Leaned the weapon on my back.'

'Your back?'

'I was throwing up, if it's any of your business. Between heaves, he let go. Got him dead centre, didn't he?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'And you didn't want t'bring the rum. Well, that's why I'm in charge and you're not. Where's my corporal?'

'Here.

'Here.'

'Gather up them horses – I don't care what the Fist ordered, we're going to ride.'

At that Urb glanced over, then approached. 'Hellian—'

'Don't even try to sweet-talk me. I almost remember what you did.' She drew out her flask and drank down a mouthful. 'So be careful, Urb. Now, everybody who loosed quarrels go find them and that means all of them!' She looked back down at the two dead Edur by the entrance.

'Think we're the first to draw blood?' Tavos Pond asked, crouching to clean the blade of his sword on the cloak of the older Edur.

'Big fat war, Tavos Pond. That's what we got ourselves here.'

'They weren't so hard, Sergeant.'

'Wasn't expecting nothing either, were they? You think we can just ambush our way all the way to Letheras? Think again.' She drank a couple more mouthfuls, then sighed and glowered over at Urb. 'How soon before they're the ones doing the ambushin'? That's why I mean for us to ride – we're gonna stay ahead of the bad news 's long as we can. That way we can *be* the bad news, right? The way it's s'posed t'be.'

Corporal Reem walked up to Urb. 'Sergeant, we got us twelve horses.'

'So we get one each,' Hellian said. 'Perfect.'

'By my count,' said Reem with narrowed eyes, 'someone's going to have to ride double.'

'If you say so. Now, let's get these bodies dragged away – they got any coin? Anybody checked?'

'Some,' said Maybe. 'But mostly just polished stones.'

'Polished stones?'

'First I thought slingstones, but none of them's carrying slings. So, aye, Sergeant. Polished stones.'

Hellian turned away as the soldiers set off to dispose of the Edur corpses. Oponn's pull, finding this keep, and finding nobody in it but one freshly dead Letherii in the hallway. Place had been cleaned out, although there'd been some foodstocks in the cold-rooms. Not a drop of wine or ale, the final proof, as far as she was concerned, that this foreign empire was a mess and useless besides and pretty much worth destroying down to its very last brick.

Too bad they weren't going to get a chance to do so.

*But then, it does a body good to misunderstand orders on occasion. So, let's go hunting Edur heads.* Hellian faced the courtyard again. *Damn this darkness. Easy enough for the mages, maybe. And these grey-skins.* 'Urb,' she said in a low voice.

He edged closer, warily. 'Hellian?'

'We need us to arrange our ambushes for dusk and dawn.'

'Aye. You're right. You know, I'm glad our squads were paired up.'

'Of course you are. You unnerstand me, Urb. You're the only one who does, you know.' She wiped her nose with the back of one hand. 'It's a sad thing, Urb. A sad thing.'

'What? Killing these Tiste Edur?'

She blinked at him. 'No, you oaf. The fact that nobody else unnerstands me.'

'Aye, Hellian. Tragic.'

'That's what Banaschar always said to me, no matter what I was talking about. He'd just look at me, like you did there, and say *tragic*. So what's all that about?' She shook the flask – *still half full, but another mouthful means I'm running it down, so's I'll need to top it up. Gotta be measured about these things, in case something terrible happens and I can't get a fast refill.* 'Come on, it's time to ride.'

'And if we run into a troop of Letherii?'

Hellian frowned. 'Then we do as Keneb told us. We talk to 'em.'

'And if they don't like what we say?'

'Then we kill 'em, of course.'

'And we're riding for Letheras?'

She smiled at Urb. Then tapped the side of her slightly numb head with one finger. 'I memmored th'map – ized, memmized the map. There's towns, Urb. An' the closer we get t'Letheras, the more of them. Wha's in towns, Urb? Taverns. Bars. So, we're not takin' a straight, pre-dic-table route.'

'We're invading Lether from tavern to tavern?'

'Aye.'

'Hellian, I hate to say this, but that's kind of clever.'

'Aye. And that way we can eat real cooked food, too. It's the civilized way of conductin' war. Hellian's way.'

The bodies joined the lone Letherii in the latrine pit. Half naked, stripped of valuables, they were dumped down into the thick, turgid slop, which proved deeper than anyone had expected, as it swallowed up those corpses, leaving not a trace.

The Malazans threw the polished stones after them.

Then rode off down the dark road.

'That has the look of a way station,' the captain said under her breath.

Beak squinted, then said, 'I smell horses, sir. That long building over there.'

'Stables,' Faradan Sort said, nodding. 'Any Tiste Edur here?'

Beak shook his head. 'Deepest blue of Rashan – that's their candle, mostly. Not as deep as Kurald Galain. They call it Kurald Emurlahn, but these ones here, well, there's skuzzy foam on that blue, like what sits on

waves outside a harbour. That's chaotic power. Sick power. Power like pain if pain was good, maybe even strong. I don't know. I don't like these Edur here.'

'They're here?'

'No. I meant this continent, sir. There's just Letherii in there. Four. In that small house beside the road.'

'No magic?'

'Just some charms.'

'I want to steal four horses, Beak. Can you cast a glamour on those Letherii?'

'The Grey Candle, yes. But they'll find out after we've gone.'

'True. Any suggestions?'

Beak was happy. He had never been so happy. This captain was asking him things. Asking for suggestions. Advice. And it wasn't just for show neither. *I'm in love with her.* To her question he nodded, then tilted up his skullcap helm to scratch in his hair, and said, 'Not the usual glamour, sir. Something lots more complicated. Finishing with the Orange Candle—'

'Which is?'

'Tellann.'

'Is this going to be messy?'

'Not if we take all the horses, Captain.'

He watched her studying him, wondered what she saw. She wasn't much for expressions on that hard but beautiful face. Not even her eyes showed much. He loved her, true, but he was also a little frightened of Faradan Sort.

'All right, Beak, where do you want me?'

'In the stables with all the horses ready to leave, and maybe two saddled. Oh, and feed for us to take along.'

'And I can do all that without an alarm's being raised?'

'They won't hear a thing, sir. In fact, you could go up right now and knock on their door and they won't hear it.'

Still she hesitated. 'So I can just walk over to the stables, right out in the open, right now?'

Beak nodded with a broad smile.

'Gods below,' she muttered, 'I don't know if I'll ever get used to this.'

'Mockra has their minds, sir. They've got no defences. They've never been glamoured before, I don't think.'

She set out in a half-crouch, moving quickly, although none of that was necessary, and moments later was inside the stables.

It would take some time, Beak knew, for her to do all that he'd asked – *I just told a captain what to do! And she's doing it! Does that mean she loves me right back?* He shook himself. Not a good idea, letting his mind wander just now. He edged out from the cover of the trees lining this side of the stony road. Crouched to pick up a small rock, which he then spat on and set back down – to hold the Mockra in place – as he closed his eyes and sought out the White Candle.

Hood. Death, a cold, cold place. Even the air was dead. In his mind he looked in on that realm as if peering through a window, the wooden sill thick with melted candle wax, the white candle itself flickering to one side. Beyond, ash-heaped ground strewn with bones of all sorts. He reached through, closed a hand on the shaft of a heavy longbone, and drew it back. Working quickly, Beak pulled as many bones as would fit through the wandering window, always choosing big ones. He had no idea what the beasts had been to which all these bones belonged, but they would do.

When he was satisfied with the white, dusty pile heaped on the road, Beak closed the window and opened his eyes. Glancing across he saw the captain standing at the stables, gesturing at him.

Beak waved back, then turned and showed the bones the Purple Candle. They lifted from the road like feathers on an updraught, and as the mage hurried over to join Faradan Sort the bones followed in his wake, floating waist-high above the ground.

The captain disappeared back inside the stables before Beak arrived, then emerged, leading the horses, just as he padded up to the broad doors.

Grinning, Beak went into the stables, the bones tracking him. Once inside, smelling that wonderful musty smell of horses, leather, dung and piss-damp straw, he scattered the bones, a few into each stall, snuffing out the purple candle when he was done. He walked over to the mound of straw at one end, closed his eyes to awaken the Orange Candle, then spat into the straw.

Rejoining the captain outside he said to her, 'We can go now.'

'That's it?'

'Yes sir. We'll be a thousand paces down the road before the Tellann lights up—'

'Fire?'

'Yes sir. A terrible fire – they won't even be able to get close – and it'll burn fast but go nowhere else and by the morning there'll be nothing but ashes.'

'And charred bones that might belong to horses.'

'Yes sir.'

'You've done well tonight, Beak,' Faradan Sort said, swinging up onto one of the saddled horses.

Feeling impossibly light on his feet, Beak leapt onto the other one then looked back, with pride, at the remaining seven beasts. Decent animals, just badly treated. Which made it good that they were stealing them. Malazans knew how to care for their horses, after all.

Then he frowned and looked down at his stirrups.

The captain was doing the same, he saw a moment later, with her own. 'What is this?' she demanded in a hiss.

'Broken?' Beak wondered.

'Not that I can see – and yours are identical to mine. What fool invented these?'

'Captain,' said Beak, 'I don't think we have to worry much about Letherii cavalry, do we?'

'You've that right, Beak. Well, let's ride. If we're lucky, we won't break our necks twenty paces up the road.'

The father of the man named Throatslitter used to tell stories of the Emperor's conquest of Li Heng, long before Kellanved was emperor of anywhere. True, he'd usurped Mock on Malaz Island and had proclaimed himself the island's ruler, but since when was Malaz Island anything but a squalid haven for pirates? Few on the mainland took much notice of such things. A new tyrannical criminal in place of the old tyrannical criminal.

The conquest of Li Heng changed all that. There'd been no fleet of ships crowding the river mouth to the south and east of the city; nothing, in fact, to announce the assault. Instead, on a fine spring morning no different from countless other such mornings, Throatslitter's father, along with thousands of other doughty citizens, had, upon a casual glance towards the Inner Focus where stood the Palace of the Protectress, noted the sudden inexplicable presence of strange figures on the walls and battlements. Squat, wide, wearing furs and wielding misshapen swords and axes. Helmed in bone.

What had happened to the vaunted Guard? And why were tendrils of smoke rising from the barracks of the courtyard and parade ground? And was it – was it truly – the Protectress herself who had been seen plunging from the High Tower beside the City Temple at the heart of the cynosure?

Someone had cut off Li Heng's head in the Palace. Undead warriors stood sentinel on the walls and, a short time later, emerged in their thousands from the Inner Focus Gate to occupy the city. Li Heng's standing army –

after a half-dozen suicidal skirmishes – capitulated that same day. Kellanved now ruled the city-state, and officers and nobles of the high court knelt in fealty, and the reverberations of this conquest rattled the windows of palaces across the entire mainland of Quon Tali.

*'This, son, was the awakening of the Logros T'lan Imass. The Emperor's undead army. I was there, on the streets, and saw with my own eyes those terrible warriors with their pitted eyeholes, the stretched, torn skin, the wisps of hair bleached of all colour. They say, son, that the Logros were always there, below Reacher's Falls. Maybe in the Crevasse, maybe not. Maybe just the very dust that blew in from the west every damned day and night – who can say? But he woke them, he commanded them, and I tell you after that day every ruler on Quon Tali saw a skull's face in their silver mirror, aye.*

*'The fleet of ships came later, under the command of three madmen – Crust, Urko and Nok – but first to step ashore was none other than Surly and you know who she'd become, don't you?'*

Didn't he just. Command of the T'lan Imass didn't stop the knife in the back, did it? This detail was the defining revelation of Throatslitter's life. Command thousands, tens of thousands. Command sorcerors and imperial fleets. Hold in your hand the lives of a million citizens. The real power was none of this. The real power was the knife in the hand, the hand at a fool's back.

*The egalitarian plunge. There, Father, you old crab, a word you've never heard among the fifty or so you knew about in your long, pointless life. Paint on pots, now there's a useless skill, since pots never survive, and so all those lovely images end up in pieces, on the pebbled beaches, in the fill between walls, on the fields of the farmers. And it's true enough, isn't it, Father, that your private firing of 'The Coming of the Logros' proved about as popular as a whore's dose of the face-eater?*

Eldest son or not, mixing glazes and circling a kiln on firing day was not the future he dreamed about. *But you can paint me, Father, and call it 'The Coming of the Assassin'. My likeness to adorn funeral urns – those who fell to the knife, of course. Too bad you never understood the world well enough*

*to honour me. My chosen profession. My war against inequity in this miserable, evil existence.*

*And striking my name from the family line, well now, really, that was uncalled for.*

Fourteen years of age, Throatslitter found himself in the company of secretive old men and old women. The why and the how were without relevance, even back then. His future was set out before him, in measured strides, and not even the gods could drive him from this cold path.

He wondered about his old masters from time to time. All dead, of course. Surly had seen to that. Not that death meant failure. Her agents had failed in tracking down Throatslitter, after all, and he doubted he was the only one to evade the Claws. He also wondered if indeed he was still on the path – torn away, as he had been, from the Malazan Empire. But he was a patient man; one in his profession had to be, after all.

*Still, the Adjunct has asked for loyalty. For service to an unknown cause. We are to be unwitnessed, she said. That suits me fine. It's how assassins conduct their trade.* So he would go along with her and this Oponn-pushed army of sorry fools. For now.

He stood, arms crossed, shoulders drawn forward as he leaned against the wall, and could feel the occasional touch, light as a mouse's paw, on his chest as he watched, with half-hearted interest, the proceedings in Brullyg's private chamber.

The poor Shake ruler was sweating and no amount of his favoured ale could still the trembling of his hands as he sat huddled in his high-backed chair, eyes on the tankard in his grip rather than on the two armoured women standing before him.

Lostara Yil, Throatslitter considered, was if anything better-looking than T'amber had been. Or at least more closely aligned with his own tastes. The Pardu tattoos were sensuality writ on skin, and the fullness of her figure – unsuccessfully disguised by her armour – moved with a dancer's grace (when she moved, which she wasn't doing now, although the promise of elegance was unmistakable). The Adjunct stood in grim contrast, the poor

woman. Like those destined to dwell in the shadows of more attractive friends, she suffered the comparison with every sign of indifference, but Throatslitter – who was skilled at seeing unspoken truths – could read the pain that dull paucity delivered, and this was a human truth, no more or less sordid than all the other human truths. Those without beauty compensated in other ways, the formal but artificial ways of rank and power, and that was just how things were the world over.

*Of course when you've finally got that power, it doesn't matter how ugly you are, you can breed with the best.* Maybe this explained Lostara's presence at Tavore's side. But Throatslitter was not entirely sure of that. He didn't think they were lovers. He wasn't even convinced they were friends.

Aligned near the wall to the right of the door stood the rest of the Adjunct's retinue. Fist Blistig, his blunt, wide face shadowed with some kind of spiritual exhaustion. *Doesn't pay, Adjunct, to keep close a man like that – he drains life, hope, faith. No, Tavore, you need to get rid of him and promote some new Fists. Faradan Sort. Madan tul'Rada. Fiddler. Not Captain Kindly, though, don't even think that, woman. Not unless you want a real mutiny on your hands.*

Mutiny. Well, there, he'd said it. Thought it, actually, but that was close enough. To conjure the word was to awaken the possibility, like making the scratch to invite the fester. The Bonehunters were now scattered to the winds and that was a terrible risk. He suspected that, at the end of this bizarre campaign, her soldiers would come trickling back in paltry few number, if at all.

*Unwitnessed. Most soldiers don't like that idea. True, it made them hard – when she told them – but that fierceness can't last. The iron is too cold. Its taste too bitter. Gods, just look at Blistig for the truth of that.*

Beside the Fist stood Withal, the Meckros blacksmith – *the man we went to Malaz City to get, and we still don't know why. Oh, there's blood in your shadow, isn't there? Malazan blood. T'amber's. Kalam's. Maybe Quick Ben's, too. Are you worth it?* Throatslitter had yet to see Withal speaking to a soldier. Not one, not a word of thanks, not an apology for the lives

sacrificed. He was here because the Adjunct needed him. For what? *Hah, not like she's talking, is it? Not our cagey Tavore Paran.*

To Withal's right stood Banaschar, a deposed high priest of D'rek, if the rumours were true. Yet another passenger in this damned renegade army. But Throatslitter knew Banaschar's purpose. *Coin. Thousands, tens of thousands. He's our paymaster, and all this silver and gold in our pouches was stolen from somewhere. Has to be. Nobody's that rich. The obvious answer? Why, how about the Worm of Autumn's temple coffers?*

*Pray to the Worm, pay an army of disgruntled malcontents. Somehow, all you believers, I doubt that was in your prayers.*

Poor Brullyg had few allies in this chamber. Balm's source of lust, this Captain Shurq Elalle of the privateer *Undying Gratitude*, and her first mate, Skorgen Kaban the Pretty. And neither seemed eager to leap to Brullyg's side of the sandpit.

But that Shurq, she was damned watchful. Probably a lot more dangerous than the usurper of this cruddy island.

The Adjunct had been explaining, in decent traders' tongue, the new rules of governance on Second Maiden Fort, and with each statement Brullyg's expression had sagged yet further.

Entertaining, if one was inclined towards sardonic humour.

'Ships from our fleet,' she was now explaining, 'will be entering the harbour to resupply. One at a time, since it wouldn't do to panic your citizens—'

A snort from Shurq Elalle, who had drawn her chair to one side, almost in front of where Throatslitter leaned against the wall, to permit herself a clear view of host and guests. Beside her, Skorgen was filling his prodigious gut with Brullyg's favourite ale, the tankard in one hand, the finger of the other hand exploring the depths of one mangled, rose-red ear. The man had begun a succession of belches, each released in a heavy sigh, that had been ongoing for half a bell now, with no sign of ending. The entire room stank of his yeasty exhalations.

The captain's derisive expostulation drew the Adjunct's attention. 'I understand your impatience,' Tavore said in a cool voice, 'and no doubt you wish to leave. Unfortunately, I must speak to you and will do so shortly—'

'Once you've thoroughly detailed Brullyg's emasculation, you mean.' Shurq lifted one shapely leg and crossed it on the other, then laced together her hands on her lap, smiling sweetly up at the Adjunct.

Tavore's colourless eyes regarded the pirate captain for a long moment, then she glanced over to where stood her retinue. 'Banaschar.'

'Adjunct?'

'What is wrong with this woman?'

'She's dead,' the ex-priest replied. 'A necromantic curse.'

'Are you certain?'

Throatslitter cleared his throat and said, 'Adjunct, Corporal Deadsmell said the same thing when we saw her down in the tavern.'

Brullyg was staring at Shurq with wide, bulging eyes, his jaw hanging slack.

At Shurq's side, Skorgen Kaban was suddenly frowning, his eyes darting. Then he withdrew the finger that had been plugging one ear and looked down at the gunk smeared all over it. After a moment, Pretty slid that finger into his mouth.

'Well,' Shurq sighed up at Tavore, 'you've done it now, haven't you? Alas, the coin of this secret is the basest of all, namely *vanity*. Now, if you possess some unpleasant bigotry regarding the undead, then I must re-evaluate my assessment of you, Adjunct. And your motley companions.'

To Throatslitter's surprise, Tavore actually smiled. 'Captain, the Malazan Empire is well acquainted with undead, although few possessing your host of charms.'

*Gods below, she's flirting with this sweet-scented corpse!*

'Host indeed,' murmured Banaschar, then was so rude as to offer no elaboration. *Hood-damned priests. Good for nothing at all.*

'In any case,' Tavore resumed, 'we are without prejudice in this matter. I apologize for posing the question leading to this unveiling. I was simply curious.'

'So am I,' Shurq replied. 'This Malazan Empire of yours – do you have any particular reason for invading the Lether Empire?'

'I was led to understand that this island is independent—'

'So it is, since the Edur Conquest. But you're hardly invading one squalid little island. No. You're just using this to stage your assault on the mainland. So let me ask again, why?'

'Our enemy,' the Adjunct said, all amusement now gone, 'are the Tiste Edur, Captain. Not the Letherii. In fact, we would encourage a general uprising of Letherii—'

'You won't get it,' Shurq Elalle said.

'Why not?' Lostara Yil asked.

'Because we happen to like things the way they are.

More or less.' When no-one spoke, she smiled and continued, 'The Edur may well have usurped the rulers in their absurd half-finished palace in Letheras. And they may well have savaged a few Letherii armies on the way to the capital. But you will not find bands of starving rebels in the forests dreaming of independence.'

'Why not?' Lostara demanded again in an identical tone.

'They conquered, but we won. Oh, I wish Tehol Beddict was here, since he's much better at explaining things, but let me try. I shall imagine Tehol sitting here, to help me along. Conquest. There are different kinds of conquests.

Now, we have Tiste Edur lording it here and there, the elite whose word is law and never questioned. After all, their sorcery is cruel, their judgement

cold and terribly simplistic. They are, in fact, above all law – as the Letherii understand the notion—'

'And,' Lostara pressed, 'how do they understand the notion of law?'

'Well, a set of deliberately vague guidelines one hires an advocate to evade when necessary.'

'What were you, Shurq Elalle, before you were a pirate?'

'A thief. I've employed a few advocates in my day. In any case, my point is this. The Edur rule but either through ignorance or indifference – and let's face it, without ignorance you don't get to indifference – they care little about the everyday administration of the empire. So, that particular apparatus remains Letherii and is, these days, even less regulated than it has been in the past.' She smiled again, one leg rocking. 'As for us lower orders, well, virtually nothing has changed. We stay poor. Debt-ridden and comfortably miserable and, as Tehol might say, miserable in our comfort.'

'So,' Lostara said, 'not even the Letherii nobles would welcome a change in the present order.'

'Them least of all.'

'What of your Emperor?'

'Rhulad? From all accounts, he is insane, and effectively isolated besides. The empire is ruled by the Chancellor, and he's Letherii. He was also Chancellor in the days of King Diskanar, and he was there to ensure that the transition went smoothly.'

A grunt from Blistig, and he turned to Tavore. 'The marines, Adjunct,' he said in a half-moan.

And Throatslitter understood and felt a dread chill seeping through him. *We sent them in, expecting to find allies, expecting them to whip the countryside into a belligerent frenzy. But they won't get that.*

*The whole damned empire is going to rise up all right. To tear out their throats.*

*Adjunct, you have done it again.*

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

> Crawl down sun this is not your time Black waves slide under the sheathed moon upon the shore a silent storm a will untamed heaves up from the red-skirled foam Scud to your mountain nests you iron clouds to leave the sea its dancing refuse of stars on this host of salty midnight tides Gather drawn and swell tight your tempest lift like scaled heads from the blind depths all your effulgent might in restless roving eyes Reel back you tottering forests this night the black waves crash on the black shore to steal the flesh from your bony roots death comes, shouldering aside in cold legion in a marching wind this dread this blood this reaper's gale
>
> *The Coming Storm*
>
> Reffer

The fist slammed down at the far end of the table. .Food-crusted cutlery danced, plates thumped then skidded. The reverberation – heavy as thunder – rattled the goblets and shook all that sat down the length of the long table's crowded world.

Fist shivering, pain lancing through the numb shock, Tomad Sengar slowly sat back.

Candle flames steadied, seeming eager to please with their regained calm, the pellucid warmth of their yellow light an affront nonetheless to the Edur's bitter anger.

Across from him, his wife lifted a silk napkin to her lips, daubed once, then set it down and regarded her husband.

'Coward.'

Tomad flinched, his gaze shifting away to scan the plastered wall to his right. Lifting past the discordant object hanging there to some place less . . . painful. Damp stains painted mottled maps near the ceiling. Plaster had lifted, buckled, undermined by that incessant leakage. Cracks zigzagged down like the after-image of lightning.

'You will not see him,' Uruth said.

'He will not see me,' Tomad replied, and this was not in agreement. It was, in fact, a retort.

'A disgusting, scrawny Letherii who sleeps with young boys has defeated you, husband. He stands in your path and your bowels grow weak. Do not refute my words – you will not even meet my eyes. You have surrendered our last son.'

Tomad's lips twisted in a snarl. 'To whom, Uruth? Tell me. Chancellor Triban Gnol, who wounds children and calls it love?' He looked at her then, unwilling to admit, even to himself, the effort that gesture demanded of him.

'Shall I break his neck for you, wife? Easier than snapping a dead branch. What do you think his bodyguards will do? Stand aside?'

'Find allies. Our kin—'

'Are fools. Grown soft with indolence, blind with uncertainty.

They are more lost than is Rhulad.'

'I had a visitor today,' Uruth said, refilling her goblet with the carafe of wine that had nearly toppled from the table with Tomad's sudden violence.

'I am pleased for you.'

'Perhaps you are. A K'risnan. He came to tell me that Bruthen Trana has disappeared. He suspects that Karos Invictad – or the Chancellor – have exacted their revenge.

They have murdered Bruthen Trana. A Tiste Edur's blood is on their hands.'

'Can your K'risnan prove this?'

'He has begun on that path, but admits to little optimism. But none of that is, truth be told, what I would tell you.'

'Ah, so you think me indifferent to the spilling of Edur blood by Letherii hands?'

'Indifferent? No, husband. Helpless. Will you interrupt me yet again?'

Tomad said nothing, not in acquiescence, but because he had run out of things to say. To her. To anyone.

'Good,' she said. 'I would tell you this. I believe the K'risnan was lying.'

'About what?'

'I believe he knows what has happened to Bruthen Trana, and that he came to me to reach the women's council, and to reach you, husband. First, to gauge my reaction to the news at the time of its telling, then to gauge our more measured reaction in the days to come. Second, by voicing his suspicion, false though it is, he sought to encourage our growing hatred for the Letherii. And our hunger for vengeance, thus continuing this feud behind curtains, which, presumably, will distract Karos and Gnol.'

'And, so distracted, they perchance will miss comprehension of some greater threat – which has to do with wherever Bruthen Trana has gone.'

'Very good, husband. Coward you may be, but you are not stupid.' She paused to sip, then said, 'That is something.'

'How far will you push me, wife?'

'As far as is necessary.'

'We were not here. We were sailing half this damned world. We returned to find the conspiracy triumphant, dominant and well entrenched. We returned, to find that we have lost our last son.'

'Then we must win him back.'

'There is no-one left to win, Uruth. Rhulad is mad.

Nisall's betrayal has broken him.'

'The bitch is better gone than still in our way. Rhulad repeats his errors. With her, so he had already done with that slave, Udinaas. He failed to learn.'

Tomad allowed himself a bitter smile. 'Failed to learn. So have we all, Uruth. We saw for ourselves the poison that was Lether. We perceived well the threat, and so marched down to conquer, thus annihilating that threat for ever more. Or so we'd thought.'

'It devoured us.'

He looked again to the wall on the right, where, hanging from an iron hook, there was a bundle of fetishes. Feathers, strips of sealskin, necklaces of strung shells, shark teeth.

The bedraggled remnants of three children – all that remained to remind them of their lives.

Some did not belong, for the son who had owned certain of those items had been banished, his life swept away as if it had never been. Had Rhulad seen these, even the binding of filial blood would not spare the lives of Tomad and Uruth. Trull Sengar – the name itself was anathema, a crime, and the punishment of its utterance was death.

Neither cared.

'A most insipid poison indeed,' Uruth continued, eyeing her goblet. 'We grow fat. The warriors get drunk and sleep in the beds of Letherii whores. Or lie unconscious in the durhang dens. Others simply . . . disappear.'

'They return home,' Tomad said, repressing a pang at the thought. Home. Before all this.

'Are you certain?'

He met her eyes once more. 'What do you mean?'

'Karos Invictad and his Patriotists never cease their vigilant tyranny of the people. They make arrests every day.

Who is to say they have not arrested Tiste Edur?'

'He could not hide that, wife.'

'Why not? Now that Bruthen Trana is gone, Karos Invictad does as he pleases. No-one stands at his shoulder now.'

'He did as he pleased before.'

'You cannot know that, husband. Can you? What constraints did Invictad perceive – real or imagined, it matters not – when he knew Bruthen Trana was watching him?'

'I know what you want,' Tomad said in a low growl. 'But who is to blame for all of this?'

'That no longer matters,' she replied, watching him carefully – fearing what, he wondered. Another uncontrolled burst of violence? Or the far more insipid display revealing his despair? 'I don't know how you can say that,' he said. 'He sent our sons to retrieve the sword. That decision doomed them all.

Us all. And look, we now sit in the palace of the Lether Empire, rotting in the filth of Letherii excess. We have no defence against indolence and apathy, against greed and decadence. These enemies do not fall to the sword, do not skid away from a raised shield.'

'Hannan Mosag, husband, is our only hope. You must go to him.'

'To conspire against our son?'

'Who is, as you have said, insane. Blood is one thing,' Uruth said, slowly leaning forward, 'but we now speak of the survival of the Tiste Edur. Tomad, the women are ready – we have been ready for a long time.'

He stared at her, wondering who this woman was, this cold, cold creature. Perhaps he was a coward, after all.

When Rhulad had sent Trull away, he had said nothing.

But then, neither had Uruth. And what of his own conspiracy? With Binadas? Find Trull. Please. Find the bravest among us. Recall the Sengar

bloodline, son. Our first strides onto this world. Leading a legion onto its stony ground, loyal officers of Scabandari. Who drew the first Andii blood on the day of betrayal? That is our blood. That – not this.

So, Tomad had sent Binadas away. Had sent a son to his death. *Because I had not the will to do it myself.*

*Coward.*

Watching him still, Uruth carefully refilled her goblet.

*Binadas, my son, your slayer awaits Rhulad's pleasure. Is that enough?*

Like any old fool who had once wagered mortal lives, the Errant wandered the corridors of enlivened power, muttering his litany of lost opportunities and bad choices. Exhalation of sorcery averted the eyes of those who strode past, the guards at various doorways and intersections, the scurrying servants who fought their losing battle with the crumbling residence known – now with irony – as the Eternal Domicile. They saw but did not see, and no afterimage remained in their minds upon passing.

More than any ghost, the Elder God was forgettable. But not as forgettable as he would have liked. He had worshippers now, at the cost of an eye binding him and his power, warring with his will in the guise of faith. Of course, every god knew of that war – such subversion seemed the primary purpose of every priest. Reduction of the sacred into the mundane world of mortal rivalries, politics and the games of control and manipulation of as many people as there were adherents. Oh, and yes, the acquisition of wealth, be it land or coin, be it the adjudication of fate or the gathering of souls.

With such thoughts haunting him, the Errant stepped into the throne room, moving silently to one side to take his usual place against a wall between two vast tapestries, as unnoticed as the grandiose scenes woven into those frames – images in which could be found some figure in the background very closely resembling the Errant.

The Chancellor Triban Gnol – with whom the Errant had shared a bed when expedience demanded it – stood before Rhulad who slouched like

some sated monstrosity, poignant with wealth and madness. One of the Chancellor's bodyguards hovered a few paces back from Gnol, looking bored as his master recited numbers.

Detailing, once more, the growing dissolution of the treasury.

These sessions, the Errant understood, with some admiration, were deliberate travails intended to further exhaust the Emperor. Revenues and losses, expenses and the sudden peak in defaulted debts, piled up in droning cadence like the gathering of forces preparing to lay siege.

An assault against which Rhulad had no defence.

He would surrender, as he always did. Relinquishing all management to the Chancellor. A ritual as enervating to witness as it was to withstand, yet the Errant felt no pity.

The Edur were barbarians. Like children in the face of civilized sophistication.

*Why do I come here, day after day? What am I waiting to witness here? Rhulad's final collapse? Will that please me? Entertain me? How sordid have my tastes become?*

He held his gaze on the Emperor. Dulled coins luridly gleaming, a rhythm of smudged reflection rising and settling with Rhulad's breathing; the black sanguine promise of the sword's long, straight blade, tip dug into the marble dais, the grey bony hand gripping the wire-wrapped handle. Sprawled there on his throne, Rhulad was indeed a metaphor made real. Armoured in riches and armed with a weapon that promised both immortality and annihilation, he was impervious to everything but his own growing madness. When Rhulad fell, the Errant believed, it would be from the inside out.

The ravaged face revealed this truth in a cascade of details, from the seamed scars of past failures to which, by virtue of his having survived them, he was indifferent, to whatever lessons they might hold. Pocked flesh to mock the possession of wealth long lost. Sunken eyes wherein resided the despairing penury of his spirit, a spirit that at times pushed close to those glittering dark prisms and let loose its silent howl.

Twitches tracked this brutal mien. Random ripples beneath the mottled skin, a migration of expressions attempting to escape the remote imperial mask.

One could understand, upon looking at Rhulad on his throne, the lie of simplicity that power whispered in the beholder's ear. The seductive voice urging pleasurable and satisfying reduction, from life's confusion to death's clarity.

This, murmured power, is how I am revealed. Stepping naked through all the disguises. I am threat and if threat does not suffice, then I act. Like a reaper's scythe.

The lie of simplicity. Rhulad still believed it. In that he was no different from every other ruler, through every age, in every place where people gathered to fashion a common, the weal of community with its necessity for organization and division. Power is violence, its promise, its deed. Power cares nothing for reason, nothing for justice, nothing for compassion. It is, in fact, the singular abnegation of these things – once the cloak of deceits is stripped away, this one truth is revealed.

And the Errant was tired of it. All of it.

Mael once said there was no answer. For any of this. He said it was the way of things and always would be, and the only redemption that could be found was that all power, no matter how vast, how centralized, no matter how dominant, will destroy itself in the end. What entertained then was witnessing all those expressions of surprise on the faces of the wielders.

This seemed a far too bitter reward, as far as the Errant was concerned. *I have naught of Mael's capacity for cold, depthless regard. Nor his legendary patience. Nor, for that matter, his temper.*

No Elder God was blind to the folly of those who would reign in the many worlds. Assuming it was able to think at all, of course, and for some that was in no way a certain thing.

Anomander Rake saw it clearly enough, and so he turned away from its vastness, instead choosing to concentrate on specific, minor conflicts. And

he denied his worshippers, a crime so profound to them that they simply rejected it out of hand. Osserc, on the other hand, voiced his own refusal – of the hopeless truth – and so tried again and again and failed every time. For Osserc, Anomander Rake's very existence became an unconscionable insult.

*Draconus – ah, now he was no fool. He would have wearied of his tyranny – had he lived long enough. I still wonder if he did not in fact welcome his annihilation. To die beneath the sword made by his own hands, to see his most cherished daughter standing to one side, witness, wilfully blind to his need . . . Draconus, how could you not despair of all you once dreamed?*

*And then there was Kilmandaros. Now she liked the notion of . . . simplicity. The solid righteousness of her fist was good enough for her. But then, see where it took her!*

*And what of K'rul? Why, he was—*

'Stop!' Rhulad shrieked, visibly jolting on the throne, the upper half of his body suddenly leaning forward, the eyes black with sudden threat. 'What did you just say?'

The Chancellor frowned, then licked his withered lips.

'Emperor, I was recounting the costs of disposing the corpses from the trench-pens—'

'Corpses, yes.' Rhulad's hand twitched where it folded over the throne's ornate arm. He stared fixedly at Triban Gnol, then, with a strange smile, he asked, 'What corpses?'

'From the fleets, sire. The slaves rescued from the island of Sepik, the northernmost protectorate of the Malazan Empire.'

'Slaves. Rescued. Slaves.'

The Errant could see Triban Gnol's confusion, a momentary flicker, then . . . comprehension.

*Oh now, let us witness this!*

'Your fallen kin, sire. Those of Tiste Edur blood who had suffered beneath the tyranny of the Malazans.'

'Rescued.' Rhulad paused as if to taste that word. 'Edur blood.'

'Diluted—'

'Edur blood!'

'Indeed, Emperor.'

*'Then why are they in the trench-pens?'*

'They were deemed fallen, sire.'

Rhulad twisted on the throne, as if assailed from within.

His head snapped back. His limbs were seized with trembling. He spoke as one lost. 'Fallen? But they are our kin. In this entire damned world, our only kin!'

'That is true, Emperor. I admit, I was somewhat dismayed at the decision to consign them to those most terrible cells—'

'Whose decision, Gnol? Answer me!'

A bow, which the Errant knew hid a satisfied gleam in the Chancellor's eyes – quickly disguised as he looked up once more. 'The disposition of the fallen Sepik Edur was the responsibility of Tomad Sengar, Emperor.'

Rhulad slowly settled back. 'And they are dying.'

'In droves, sire. Alas.'

'We rescued them to deliver our own torment. Rescued them to kill them.'

'It is, I would suggest, a somewhat unjust fate—'

'Unjust? You scrawny snake – why did you not tell me of this before?'

'Emperor, you indicated no interest in the financial details—'

*Oh, a mistake there, Gnol.*

'The what?'

Beads of sweat on the back of the Chancellor's neck now.

'The varied expenses associated with their imprisonment, sire.'

*'They are Tiste Edur!'*

Another bow.

Rhulad suddenly clawed at his face and looked away.

'Edur blood,' he murmured. 'Rescued from slavery. Trenchpens is their reward.'

Triban Gnol cleared his throat. 'Many died in the holds of the ships, sire. As I understand it, their maltreatment began upon leaving Sepik Island. What is it you would have me do, Emperor?'

*And so deftly you regain ground, Triban Gnol.*

'Bring me Tomad Sengar. And Uruth. Bring to me my father and mother.'

'Now?'

The sword scraped free, point lifting to centre on Triban Gnol. 'Yes, Chancellor. Now.'

Triban Gnol and his bodyguard quickly departed.

Rhulad was alone in his throne room, now holding his sword out on nothing.

'How? How could they do this? These poor people – they are of our own blood. I need to think.' The Emperor lowered the sword then shifted about on the throne, drawing his coinclad legs up. 'How? Nisall? Explain this to me – no, you cannot, can you. You have fled me. Where are you, Nisall? Some claim you are dead. Yet where is your body? Are you just another bloated corpse in the canal – the ones I see from the tower – were you one of those, drifting past? They tell me you were a traitor. They tell me you were not a traitor. They all lie to me. I know that, I can see that. Hear that. They all lie to me—' He sobbed then, his free hand covering his mouth, his eyes darting about the empty room.

The Errant saw that gaze slide right over him. He thought to step forward then, to relinquish the sorcery hiding him, to say to the Emperor: *Yes, sire. They all lie to you. But I will not. Do you dare hear the truth, Emperor Rhulad? All of it?*

'Slaves. This – this is wrong. Tomad – Father – where did this cruelty come from?'

*Oh, dear Rhulad . . .*

'Father, we will talk. You and me. Alone. And Mother, yes, you too. The three of us. It has been so long since we did that. Yes, that is what we will do. And you must . . . you must not lie to me. No, that I will not accept.

'Father, where is Nisall?

'Where is Trull?'

Could an Elder God's heart break? The Errant almost sagged then, as Rhulad's plaintive query echoed momentarily in the chamber, then quickly died, leaving only the sound of the Emperor's laboured breathing.

Then, a harder voice emerging from the Emperor: 'Hannan Mosag, this is all your fault. You did this. To us. To me. You twisted me, made me send them all away. To find champions. But no, that was my idea, wasn't it? I can't – can't remember – so many lies here, so many voices, all lying. Nisall, you left me. Udinaas – I will find you both. I will see the skin flayed from your writhing bodies, I will listen to your screams—'

The sound of boots in the hallway beyond.

Rhulad looked up guiltily, then settled into the throne.

Righting the weapon. Licking his lips. Then, as the doors creaked open, he sat with a fixed grin, a baring of his teeth to greet his parents.

Dessert arrived at the point of a sword. A full dozen Letherii guards, led by Sirryn Kanar, burst into the private chambers of Tomad and Uruth Sengar. Weapons drawn, they entered the dining room to find the two Edur seated each at one end of the long table.

Neither had moved. Neither seemed surprised.

'On your feet,' Sirryn growled, unable to hide his satisfaction, his delicious pleasure at this moment. 'The Emperor demands your presence. Now.'

The tight smile on Tomad's face seemed to flicker a moment, before the old warrior rose to his feet.

Sneering, Uruth had not moved. 'The Emperor would see his mother? Very well, he may ask.'

Sirryn looked down at her. 'This is a command, woman.'

'And I am a High Priestess of Shadow, you pathetic thug.'

'Sent here by the Emperor's will. You will stand, or—'

'Or what? Will you dare lay hands on me, Letherii? Recall your place.'

The guard reached out.

'Stop!' Tomad shouted. 'Unless, Letherii, you wish your flesh torn from your bones. My wife has awakened Shadow, and she will not suffer your touch.'

Sirryn Kanar found he was trembling. With rage. 'Then advise her, Tomad Sengar, of her son's impatience.'

Uruth slowly drained her goblet of wine, set it carefully down, then rose. 'Sheathe your weapons, Letherii. My husband and I can walk to the throne room in your company, or alone. My preference is for the latter, but I permit you this single warning. Sheathe your swords, or I will kill you all.'

Sirryn gestured to his soldiers and weapons slid back into scabbards. After a moment, his did the same. *I will have an answer for this, Uruth Sengar. Recall my place? Of course, if the lie suits you, as it does me . . . for now.*

'Finally,' Uruth said to Tomad, 'we shall have an opportunity to tell our son all that needs to be told. An audience.

Such privilege.'

'It may be you shall await his pleasure,' Sirryn said.

'Indeed? How long?'

The Letherii smiled at her. 'That is not for me to say.'

'This game is not Rhulad's. It is yours. You and your Chancellor.'

'Not this time,' Sirryn replied.

'I have killed Tiste Edur before.'

Samar Dev watched Karsa Orlong as the Toblakai examined the tattered clamshell armour shirt he had laid out on the cot. The pearlescent scales were tarnished and chipped, and large patches of the thick leather underpanels – hinged with rawhide – were visible. He had gathered a few hundred holed coins – made of tin and virtually worthless – and was clearly planning to use them to amend the armour.

Was this a gesture of mockery, she wondered. A visible sneer in Rhulad's face? Barbarian or not, she would not put it past Karsa Orlong.

'I cleared the deck of the fools,' he continued, then glanced over at her. 'And what of those in the forest of the Anibar? As for the Letherii, they're even more pathetic – see how they cower, even now? I will explore this city, with my sword strapped to my back, and none shall stop me.'

She rubbed at her face. 'There is a rumour that the first roll of champions will be called. Soon. Raise the ire of these people, Karsa, and you will not have to wait long to face the Emperor.'

'Good,' he grunted. 'Then I shall walk Letheras as its new emperor.'

'Is that what you seek?' she asked, her eyes narrowing on him in surprise.

'If that is what is needed for them to leave me be.'

She snorted. 'Then the last thing you want is to be emperor.'

He straightened, frowning down at the gaudy if bedraggled armour shirt. 'I am not interested in fleeing, witch.

There is no reason for them to forbid me.'

'You can step outside this compound and wander where you will . . . just leave your sword behind.'

'That I will not do.'

'Then here you remain, slowly going mad at the Emperor's pleasure.'

'Perhaps I shall fight my way through.'

'Karsa, they just don't want you killing citizens. Given that you are so, uh, easily offended, it's not an unusual request.'

'What offends me is their lack of faith.'

'Right,' she snapped, 'which you have well earned by killing Edur and Letherii at every turn. Including a Preda—'

'I did not know he was that.'

'Would it have made a difference? No, I thought not.

How about the fact that he was a brother to the Emperor?'

'I did not know that either.'

'And?'

'And what, Samar Dev?'

'Murdered him with a spear, wasn't it?'

'He assailed me with magic—'

'You have told me this tale, Karsa Orlong. You had just slaughtered his crew. Then kicked in the door to his cabin.

Then crushed the skulls of his bodyguards. I tell you, in his place I too would have drawn upon my warren – assuming I had one, which I don't. And I would have thrown everything I had at you.'

'There is no point to this conversation,' the Toblakai said in a growl.

'Fine,' she said, rising from her chair. 'I am off to find Taxilian. At least his obdurate obsessions are less infuriating.'

'Is he your lover now?'

She halted at the doorway. 'And if he was?'

'Just as well,' Karsa said, now glowering down at his patchy armour. 'I would break you in two.'

Jealousy to join the host of other madnesses? Spirits below! She turned back to the door. 'I'd be more inclined towards Senior Assessor. Alas, he has taken vows of celibacy.'

'The fawning monk is still here?'

'He is.'

'You have sordid tastes, witch.'

'Well,' she said after a moment, 'I see no possible way of responding to that comment.'

'Of course not.'

Lips pressed tight together, Samar Dev left the room.

Karsa Orlong's mood was foul, but it did not occur to him that it in any way flavoured his conversation with Samar Dev. She was a woman and any exchange of words with a woman was fraught with her torturer's array of deadly implements, each one hovering at the very edge of a man's comprehension. Swords were simpler. Even the harried disaster of all-out war was simpler than the briefest, lightest touch of a woman's attention. What infuriated him was how much he missed that touch. True, there were whores aplenty for the champions awaiting the Emperor. But there was nothing subtle – nothing real – in that.

There must be a middle ground, Karsa told himself.

Where the exchange exulted in all the sparks and feints that made things interesting, without putting his dignity at risk. Yet he was realistic enough to hold little hope of ever finding it.

The world was filled with weapons and combat was a way of life. Perhaps the only way of life. He'd bled to whips and words, to punches and glances. He'd been bludgeoned by invisible shields, blindsided by unseen clubs, and had laboured under the chains of his own vows. And as Samar Dev would say, one survives by withstanding this onslaught, this history of the then and the now. To fail was to fall, but falling was not always synonymous with a quick, merciful death. Rather, one could fall into the slow dissolution, losses heaped high, that dragged a mortal to his or her knees. That made them slow slayers of themselves.

He had come to understand his own traps, and, in that sense, he was probably not yet ready to encounter someone else's, to step awry and discover the shock of pain. Still, the hunger never went away. And this tumult in his soul was wearisome and so a most sordid invitation to a disgruntled mood.

Easily solved by mayhem.

*Lacking love, the warrior seeks violence.*

Karsa Orlong sneered as he slung the stone sword over his left shoulder and strode out into the corridor. 'I hear you, Bairoth Gild. You would be my conscience?' He grunted a laugh. 'You, who stole my woman.'

*Perhaps you have found another, Karsa Orlong.*

'I would break her in two.'

*That has not stopped you before.*

But no, this was a game. Bairoth Gild's soul was bound within a sword. These sly words filling Karsa's skull were his own. Lacking someone else's attention, he was now digging his own pitfalls. 'I think I need to kill someone.'

From the corridor to a broader hallway, then on to the colonnaded transept, into a side passage and on to the compound's north postern gate. Meeting no-one on the way, further befouling Karsa's mood. The gate was inset with a small guardhouse to its left where the heavy latch release could be found.

The Letherii seated within had time to glance up before the Toblakai's fist connected solidly with his face. Blood sprayed from a shattered nose and the hapless man sank down into his chair, then slid like a sack of onions to the floor. Stepping over him, Karsa lifted the latch and slid the bronze bar to his left, until its right-hand end cleared the gate itself. The bar dropped down into a wheeled recess with a clunk. Emerging outside once more, Karsa pushed the gate open and, ducking to clear the lintel, stepped out into the street beyond.

There was a flash as some sort of magical ward ignited the moment he crossed the threshold. Fires burgeoned, a whisper of vague pain, then the flames dwindled and vanished. Shaking his head to clear the spell's metallic reverberation from his mind, he continued on.

A few citizens here and there; only one noted his appearance and that one – eyes widening – quickened his pace and moments later turned a corner and was lost from sight.

Karsa drew a deep breath, then set off for the canal he had seen from the roof of the barracks.

Vast as a river barge, the enormous black-haired woman in mauve silks filled the entrance to the courtyard restaurant, fixed her eyes on Tehol Beddict, then surged forward with the singular intent of a hungry leviathan.

Beside him, Bugg seemed to cringe back in his chair. 'By the Abyss, Master—'

'Now now,' Tehol murmured as the woman drew closer.

'Pragmatism, dear Bugg, must now be uppermost among your, uh, considerations. Find Huldo and get his lads to drag over that oversized couch from the back of the kitchen. Quick now, Bugg!'

The manservant's departure was an uncharacteristic bolt.

The woman – sudden centre of attention with most conversations falling away – seemed for all her impressive girth to glide as she moved between the blessedly widely spaced tables, and in her dark violet eyes there gleamed a sultry confidence so at odds with her ungainly proportions that

Tehol felt an alarming stir in his groin and sweat prickled in enough manly places to make him shift uneasily in his chair, all thoughts of the meal on the plate before him torn away like so many clothes.

He did not believe it possible that flesh could move in as many directions all at once, every swell beneath the silk seemingly possessed of corporeal independence, yet advancing in a singular chorus of overt sexuality. Her shadow engulfing him, Tehol loosed a small whimper, struggling to drag his eyes up, past the stacked folds of her belly, past the impossibly high, bulging, grainsack-sized breasts – lost for a moment in that depthless cleavage – then, with heroic will, yet higher to the smooth udder beneath her chin; higher still, neck straining, to that so round face with its broad, painted, purple lips – higher – *Errant help me* – to those delicious, knowing eyes.

'You disgust me, Tehol.'

'I – what?'

'Where's Bugg with that damned couch?'

Tehol leaned forward, then recoiled again with instinctive self-preservation. 'Rucket? Is that you?'

'Quiet, you fool. Do you have any idea how long it took us to perfect this illusion?'

'B-but—'

'The best disguise is misdirection.'

'Misdirection? Oh, why . . . oh, well of course, when you put it that way. I mean, all the way. Sorry, that just tumbled out. Came out wrong, I mean—'

'Stop staring at my tits.'

'I'd be the only one in here not staring,' he retorted, 'which would be very suspicious. Besides, who decided on that particular . . . defiance of the earth's eternal pull? Probably Ormly – it's those piggy eyes of his, hinting at perverse fantasies.'

Bugg had arrived with two of Huldo's servers carrying the couch between them. They set it down then hastily retreated.

Bugg returned to his seat. 'Rucket,' he said under his breath, shaking his head, 'do you not imagine that a woman of your stature would not already be infamous in Letheras?'

'Not if I never went out, would I? As it turns out, there are plenty of recluses in this city—'

'Because most of them were the Guild's illusions – false personalities you could assume when necessity demanded it.'

'Precisely,' she said, as if settling the matter.

Which she then did with consummate grace, easing down fluidly into the huge couch, her massive alabaster arms spreading out along the back, which had the effect of hitching her breasts up still further then spreading them like the Gates of the Damned.

Tehol glanced at Bugg. 'There are certain laws regarding the properties of physical entities, yes? There must be. I'm sure of it.'

'She is a defiant woman, Master. And please, if you will, adjust your blanket. Yes, there, beneath this blessed table.'

'Stop that.'

'Whom or what are you addressing?' Rucket asked with a leer big enough for two women.

'Damn you, Rucket, we'd just ordered, you know. Bugg's purse, or his company's, that is. And now my appetite . . .

well . . . it's—'

'Shifted?' she asked, thin perfect brows lifting above those knowing eyes. 'The problem with men elucidated right there: your inability to indulge in more than one pleasure at any one time.'

'Which you presently personify with terrible perfection.

So, how precise is this illusion of yours? I mean, the couch creaked and everything.'

'No doubt you're most eager to explore that weighty question. But first, where's Huldo with my lunch?'

'He took one look at you and then went out to hire more cooks.'

She leaned forward and pulled Tehol's plate closer. 'This will do. Especially after that cruel attempt at humour, Tehol.' She began eating with absurd delicacy.

'There's no real way in there, is there?'

Morsel of food halted halfway to her open mouth.

Bugg seemed to choke on something.

Tehol wiped sweat from his brow. 'Errant take me, I'm losing my mind.'

'You force me,' Rucket said, 'to prove to you otherwise.'

The dainty popped into her mouth.

'You expect me to succumb to an illusion?'

'Why not? Men do that a thousand times a day.'

'Without that, the world would grind to a halt.'

'Yours, maybe.'

'Speaking of which,' Bugg interjected hastily, 'your Guild, Rucket, is about to become bankrupt.'

'Nonsense. We have more wealth hidden away than the Liberty Consign.'

'That's good, because they're about to discover that most of their unadvertised holdings have been so thoroughly undermined that they're not only worthless, but fatal liabilities.'

'We transferred ours beyond the empire, Bugg. Months ago. Once we fully understood what you and Tehol were doing.'

'Where?' Bugg asked.

'Should I tell you?'

'We're not going after it,' Tehol said. 'Right, Bugg?'

'Of course not. I just want to be sure it's, uh, far enough removed.'

Rucket's eyes narrowed. 'Are you that close?'

Neither man replied.

She looked down at the plate for a moment, then settled back like a human canal lock, her belly re-emerging from the shadows in silky waves. 'Very well, gentlemen. South Pilott. Far enough away, Bugg?'

'Just.'

'That answer makes me nervous.'

'I am about to default on everything I owe,' Bugg said.

'This will cause a massive financial cascade that will not spare a single sector of industry, and not just here in Letheras, but across the entire empire and beyond. Once I do it, there will be chaos. Anarchy. People may actually die.'

'Bugg's Construction is that big?'

'Not at all. If it was, we'd have been rounded up long ago.

No, there are about two thousand seemingly independent small- and middling-sized holdings, each one perfectly positioned according to Tehol's diabolical planning to ensure that dread cascade. Bugg's Construction is but the first gravestone to tip – and it's a very crowded cemetery.'

'Your analogy makes me even more nervous.'

'Your glamour fades a touch when you're nervous,' Tehol observed. 'Please, regain your confidence, Rucket.'

'Shut your mouth, Tehol.'

'In any case,' Bugg resumed, 'this meeting was to deliver to you and the Guild the final warning before the collapse.

Needless to say, I will be hard to track down once it happens.'

Her eyes settled on Tehol. 'And you, Tehol? Planning on crawling into a hole as well?'

'I thought we weren't talking about that any more.'

'By the Abyss, Master,' Bugg muttered.

Tehol blinked, first at Bugg, then at Rucket. Then, 'Oh.

Sorry. You meant, um, was I planning on going into hiding, right? Well, I'm undecided. Part of the satisfaction, you see, is in witnessing the mess. Because, regardless of how we've insinuated ourselves in the machinery of Lether's vast commerce, the most bitter truth is that the causes behind this impending chaos are in fact systemic. Granted, we're hastening things somewhat, but dissolution – in its truest sense – is an integral flaw in the system itself. It may well view itself as immortal, eminently adaptable and all that, but that's all both illusional and delusional. Resources are never infinite, though they might seem that way. And those resources include more than just the raw product of earth and sea. They also include labour, and the manifest conceit of a monetary system with its arbitrary notions of value – the two forces we set our sights on, by the way. Shipping out the lowest classes – the dispossessed – to pressure the infrastructure, and then stripping away hard currency to escalate a recession – why are you two staring at me like that?'

Rucket smiled. 'Defaulting to the comfort of your scholarly analysis to deflect us from your more pathetic fixations. That, Tehol Beddict, is perhaps the lowest you have gone yet.'

'But we've just begun.'

'You may wish to believe that to be the case. For myself, my own curiosity is fast diminishing.'

'But think of all the challenges in store for us, Rucket!'

She surged to her feet. 'I'm going out the back way.'

'You won't fit.'

'Alas, Tehol, the same will never be said of you. Good day, gentlemen.'

'Wait!'

'Yes, Tehol?'

'Well, uh, I trust this conversation will resume at a later date?'

'I'm not hanging around for that,' Bugg said, crossing his brawny arms in a show of . . . something. Disgust, maybe.

Or, Tehol reconsidered, more likely abject envy.

'Nothing is certain,' Rucket told him. 'Barring the truth that men are wont to get lost in their illusions of grandeur.'

'Oh,' murmured Bugg, 'very nice, Rucket.'

'If that hadn't left me speechless,' Tehol said as she rolled away, 'I'd have said something.'

'I have no doubt of that, Master.'

'Your faith is a relief, Bugg.'

'Small comfort in comparison, I'd wager.'

'In comparison,' Tehol agreed, nodding. 'Now, shall we go for a walk, old friend?'

'Assuming your drape is now unmarred by unsightly bulges.'

'In a moment.'

'Master?'

Tehol smiled at the alarm on Bugg's face. 'I was just imaging her stuck there, wedged in Huldo's alleyway. Unable to turn. Helpless, in fact.'

'There it is,' he said with a sigh, 'you did indeed manage to sink lower.'

There was an old Gral legend that had begun to haunt Taralack Veed, although he could not quite grasp its relevance to this moment, here in Letheras, with the Lifestealer walking at his side as they pushed through the crowds milling outside a row of market stalls opposite the Quillas Canal.

The Gral were an ancient people; their tribes had dwelt in the wild hills of the First Empire, and there had been Gral companies serving in Dessimbelackis's vaunted armies, as trackers, as skirmishers and as shock troops, although this manner of combat ill suited them. Even then, the Gral preferred their feuds, the spilling of blood in the name of personal honour. The pursuit of vengeance was a worthy cause. Slaughtering strangers made no sense and stained the soul, demanding tortured cleansing rituals.

Further, there was no satisfaction in such murder.

Two months before the Great Fall, a commander named Vorlock Duven, leading the Karasch Legion deep into the untamed wastes of the southwest, had sent her seventy-four Gral warriors into the Tasse Hills to begin a campaign of subjugation against the tribe believed to rule that forbidding range. The Gral were to incite the Tasse to battle, then withdraw, with the savages hard on their heels, to a place of ambush at the very edge of the highlands.

Leading the Gral was a wise veteran of the Bhok'ar clan named Sidilack, called by many Snaketongue after a swordthrust into his mouth had sliced down the length of his tongue. His warriors, well blooded after a three-year campaign of conquest among the desert and plains peoples south of Ugari, were skilled at finding the hidden trails leading into the rough heights, and before long they were coming upon rude dwellings and rock shelters in the midst of ancient ruins that hinted that some terrible descent from civilization had afflicted the Tasse long ago.

At dusk on the third day seven woad-painted savages ambushed the lead scouts, killing one before being driven off. Of the four Tasse who had fallen in the clash, only one was not already dead of his wounds. The language of his pain-stricken ravings was like nothing Sidilack and his warriors had ever heard before. Beneath the dusty blue paint the Tasse were physically unlike any other nearby tribes. Tall, lithe, with strangely small hands and

feet, they had elongated faces, weak chins and oversized teeth. Their eyes were close-set, the irises tawny like dried grass, the whites blistered with so many blood vessels it seemed they might well weep red tears.

Among all four of the Tasse the signs of dehydration and malnutrition were obvious, and as fighters they had been singularly ineffective with their stone-tipped spears and knotted clubs.

The wounded savage soon died.

Resuming their hunt, the Gral pushed ever deeper, ever higher into the hills. They found ancient terraces that had once held crops, the soil now lifeless, barely able to sustain dry desert scrub. They found stone-lined channels to collect rainwater that no longer came. They found stone tombs with large capstones carved into phallic shapes. On the trail potsherds and white bleached bone fragments crunched underfoot.

At noon on the fourth day the Gral came upon the settlement of the Tasse. Twelve scraggy huts, from which rushed three warriors with spears, shrieking as they lined up in a pathetic defensive line in front of five starving females and a lone two- or three-year-old female child.

Sidilack, the wise veteran who had fought twenty battles, who had stained his soul with the slaughter of countless strangers, sent his Gral forward. The battle lasted a half-dozen heartbeats. When the Tasse men fell their women attacked with their hands and teeth. When they were all dead, the lone child crouched down and hissed at them like a cat.

A sword was raised to strike her down.

It never descended. The clearing was suddenly swallowed in shadows. Seven terrible hounds emerged to surround the child, and a man appeared. His shoulders so broad as to make him seem hunched, he was wearing an ankle-length coat of blued chain, his black hair long and unbound. Cold blue eyes fixed upon Sidilack and he spoke in the language of the First Empire: 'They were the last. I do not decry your slaughter. They lived in fear. This land – not their home – could not feed them. Abandoned by the Deragoth and their kind, they had failed in life's struggle.' He turned then to regard the child. 'But this one I will take.'

Sidilack, it was said, could feel then the deepest stain settling upon his soul. One that no cleansing ritual could eradicate. He saw, in that moment, the grim fate of his destiny, a descent into the madness of inconsolable grief. The god would take the last child, but it was most certainly the last. The blood of the others was on Sidilack's hands, a curse, a haunting that only death could relieve.

Yet he was Gral. Forbidden from taking his own life.

Another legend followed, that one recounting the long journey to Snaketongue's final end, his pursuit of questions that could not be answered, the pathos of his staggering walk into the Dead Man's Desert – realm of the fallen Gral – where even the noble spirits refused him, his soul, the hollow defence of his own crime.

Taralack Veed did not want to think of these things.

Echoes of the child, that hissing, less-than-human creature who had been drawn into the shadows by a god – to what end? A mystery within the legend that would never be solved. But he did not believe there had been mercy in that god's heart. He did not want to think of young females with small hands and feet, with sloped chins and large canines, with luminous eyes the hue of savanna grasses.

He did not want to think of Sidilack and the endless night of his doom. The warrior with slaughter's blood staining his hands and his soul. That tragic fool was nothing like Taralack Veed, he told himself again and again. Truths did not hide in vague similarities, after all; only in the specific details, and he shared none of those with old Snaketongue.

'You speak rarely these days, Taralack Veed.'

The Gral glanced up at Icarium. 'I am frightened for you,' he said.

'Why?'

'I see nothing of the hardness in your eyes, friend, the hardness that perhaps none but a longtime companion would be able to detect. The hardness that bespeaks your rage. It seems to sleep, and I do not know if even Rhulad can awaken it. If he cannot, then you will die. Quickly.'

'If all you say of me is true,' the Jhag replied, 'then my death would be welcome. And justified in every sense of the word.'

'No other can defeat the Emperor—'

'Why are you so certain I can? I do not wield a magical sword. I do not return to life should I fall. These are the rumours regarding the Tiste Edur named Rhulad, yes?'

'When your anger is unleashed, Icarium, you cannot be stopped.'

'Ah, but it seems I can.'

Taralack Veed's eyes narrowed. 'Is this the change that has come to you, Icarium? Have your memories returned to you?'

'I believe if they had, I would not now be here,' the Jhag replied, pausing before one stall offering cord-wrapped pottery. 'Look upon these items here, Taralack Veed, and tell me what you see. Empty vessels? Or endless possibilities?'

'They are naught but pots.'

Icarium smiled.

It was, the Gral decided, a far too easy smile. 'Do you mock me, Icarium?'

'Something awaits me. I do not mean this mad Emperor.

Something else. Answer me this. How does one measure time?'

'By the course of the sun, the phases of the moon, the wheel of the stars. And, of course, in cities such as this one, the sounding of a bell at fixed intervals – a wholly absurd conceit and, indeed, one that is spiritually debilitating.'

'The Gral speaks.'

'Now you truly mock me. This is unlike you, Icarium.'

'The sounding of bells, their increments established by the passing of sand or water through a narrowed vessel. As you say, a conceit. An arbitrary assertion of constancy. Can we truly say, however, that time is constant?'

'As any Gral would tell you, it is not. Else our senses lie.'

'Perhaps they do.'

'Then we are lost.'

'I appreciate your intellectual belligerence today, Taralack Veed.'

They moved on, wandering slowly alongside the canal.

'I understand your obsession with time,' the Gral said.

'You, who have passed through age after age, unchanging, unknowing.'

'Unknowing, yes. That is the problem, isn't it?'

'I do not agree. It is our salvation.'

They were silent for a few more strides. Many were the curious – at times pitying – glances cast their way.

The champions were also the condemned, after all. Yet was there hope, buried deep behind those shying eyes? There must be. For an end to the nightmare that was Rhulad Sengar, the Edur Emperor of Lether.

'Without an understanding of time, history means nothing. Do you follow, Taralack Veed?'

'Yet you do not understand time, do you?'

'No, that is true. Yet I believe I have . . . pursued this . . .

again and again. From age to age. In the faith that a revelation on the meaning of time will unlock my own hidden history. I would find its true measure, Taralack Veed. And not just its measure, but its very nature.

Consider this canal, and those linked to it. The water is pushed by current and tide from the river, then traverses the city, only to rejoin the river not far from where it first entered. We may seek to step out from the river and so choose our own path, but no matter how straight it seems, we will, in the end, return to that river.'

'As with the bells, then,' the Gral said, 'water tracks the passage of time.'

'You misunderstand,' Icarium replied, but did not elaborate.

Taralack Veed scowled, paused to spit thick phlegm onto his palms, then swept it back through his hair. Somewhere in the crowd a woman screamed, but the sound was not repeated. 'The canal's current cannot change the law that binds its direction. The canal is but a detour.'

'Yes, one that slows the passage of its water. And in turn that water changes, gathering the refuse of the city it passes through, and so, upon returning to the river, it is a different colour. Muddier, more befouled.'

'The slower your path, the muddier your boots?'

'Even so,' Icarium said, nodding.

'Time is nothing like that.'

'Are you so certain? When we must wait, our minds fill with sludge, random thoughts like so much refuse. When we are driven to action, our current is swift, the water seemingly clear, cold and sharp.'

'I'd rather, Icarium, we wait a long time. Here, in the face of what is to come.'

'The path to Rhulad? As you like. But I tell you, Taralack Veed, that is not the path I am walking.'

Another half-dozen strides.

Then the Gral spoke. 'They wrap the cord around them, Icarium, to keep them from breaking.'

Senior Assessor's eyes glittered as he stood amidst a crowd twenty paces from where Icarium and Taralack Veed had paused in front of a potter's stall. His hands were folded together, the fingers twitching. His breathing was rapid and shallow.

Beside him, Samar Dev rolled her eyes, then asked, 'Are you about to fall dead on me? If I'd known this walk involved skulking in that Jhag's shadow, I think I would have stayed in the compound.'

'The choices you make,' he replied, 'must needs be entirely of your own accord, Samar Dev. Reasonably distinct from mine or anyone else's. It is said that the history of human conflict resides exclusively in the clash of expectations.'

'Is it now?'

'Furthermore—'

'Never mind your "furthermore", Senior Assessor.

Compromise is the negotiation of expectation. With your wayward notions we do not negotiate, and so all the compromising is mine.'

'As you choose.'

She thought about hitting him, decided she didn't want to make a scene. What was it with men and their obsessions? 'He is in all likelihood going to die, and soon.'

'I think not. No, most certainly I think not.'

Icarium and the Gral resumed their meander through the crowds, and after a moment Senior Assessor followed, maintaining his distance. Sighing, Samar Dev set off after him. She didn't like this mob. It felt wrong. Tense, overwrought.

Strain was visible on faces, and the cries of the hawkers sounded strident and half desperate. Few passersby, she noted, were buying.

'Something's wrong,' she said.

'There is nothing here that cannot be explained by impending financial panic, Samar Dev. Although you may believe I am unaware of anything but him, I assure you that I have assessed the condition of Letheras and, by extension, this entire empire. A crisis looms. Wealth, alas, is not an infinite commodity. Systems such as this are dependent upon the assumption of unlimited resources, however.

These resources range from cheap labour and materials to an insatiable demand. Such demand, in turn, depends on rather more ethereal virtues,

such as confidence, will, perceived need and the bliss of short-term thinking, any one of which is vulnerable to mysterious and often inexplicable influences. We are witness, here, to the effects of a complex collusion of factors which are serving to undermine said virtues. Furthermore, it is my belief that the situation has been orchestrated.'

Her mind had begun to drift with Senior Assessor's diatribe, but this last observation drew her round. 'Letheras is under economic assault?'

'Well put, Samar Dev. Someone is manipulating the situation to achieve a cascading collapse, yes. Such is my humble assessment.'

'Humble?'

'Of course not. I view my own brilliance with irony.'

'To what end?'

'Why, to make me humble.'

'Are we going to follow Icarium and his pet Gral all afternoon?'

'I am the only living native of Cabal, Samar Dev, to have seen with my own eyes our god. Is it any wonder I follow him?'

*God? He's not a god. He's a damned Jhag from the Odhan west of Seven Cities. Suffering a tragic curse, but then, aren't they all?* A figure well ahead of Icarium and Taralack Veed caught her attention. A figure tall, hulking, with a shattered face and a huge stone sword strapped to its back.

'Oh no,' she murmured.

'What is it?' Senior Assessor asked.

'He's seen him.'

'Samar Dev?'

But he was behind her now, and she was hurrying forward, roughly pushing past people. Expectations? Most certainly. Compromise? Not a chance.

One of the sconces had a faulty valve and had begun producing thick black tendrils of smoke that coiled like serpents in the air, and Uruth's coughing echoed like barks in the antechamber. His back to the door leading to the throne room, Sirryn Kanar stood with crossed arms, watching the two Tiste Edur. Tomad Sengar was pacing, walking a path that deftly avoided the other waiting guards even as he made a point of pretending they weren't there. His wife had drawn her dark grey robe about herself, so tight she reminded Sirryn of a vulture with its wings folded close. Age had made her shoulders slightly hunched, adding to the avian impression, sufficient to draw a half-smile to the guard's mouth.

'No doubt this waiting amuses you,' Tomad said in a growl.

'So you were watching me after all.'

'I was watching the door, which you happen to be standing against.'

Contemplating kicking through it, no doubt. Sirryn's smile broadened. *Alas, you'd have to go through me, and that you won't do, will you?* 'The Emperor is very busy.'

'With what?' Tomad demanded. 'Triban Gnol decides everything, after all. Rhulad just sits with a glazed look and nods every now and then.'

'You think little of your son.'

That struck a nerve, he saw, as husband and wife both fixed hard eyes on him.

'We think less of Triban Gnol,' Uruth said.

There was no need to comment on that observation, for Sirryn well knew their opinions of the Chancellor; indeed, their views on all Letherii. Blind bigotry, of course, all the more hypocritical for the zeal with which the Edur had embraced the Letherii way of living, even as they sneered and proclaimed their disgust and contempt. *If you are so disgusted, why do you still suckle at the tit, Edur? You had your chance at destroying all this. Us. And our own whole terrible civilization.* No, there was little that was worth saying to these two savages.

He felt more than heard the scratch at the door behind him, and slowly straightened. 'The Emperor will see you now.'

Tomad wheeled round to face the door, and Sirryn saw in the bastard's face a sudden strain beneath the haughty façade. Beyond him, Uruth swept her cloak back, freeing her arms. Was that fear in her eyes? He watched her move up to stand beside her husband, yet it seemed all they drew from that proximity was yet another tension.

Stepping to one side, Sirryn Kanar swung open the door.

'Halt in the tiled circle,' he said. 'Step past it and a dozen arrows will find your body. No warning will be voiced. By the Emperor's own command. Now, proceed. Slowly.'

At this moment, a Tiste Edur and four Letherii soldiers approached the city's west gate on lathered horses. A shout from the Edur sent pedestrians scattering from the raised road. The five riders were covered in mud and two bore wounds. The swords of the two whose scabbards were not empty were blood-crusted. The Edur was one of those without weapons, and from his back jutted the stub of an arrow, its iron head buried in his right scapula. Blood soaked his cloak where the quarrel had pinned it to his back. This warrior was dying. He had been dying for four days.

Another hoarse shout from the Tiste Edur, as he led his ragged troop beneath the gate's arch, and into the city of Letheras.

The Errant studied Rhulad Sengar, who had sat motionless since the Chancellor had returned to announce the imminent arrival of Tomad and Uruth. Was it some faltering of courage that had kept the Emperor from demanding their immediate presence? There was no way to tell. Even the Chancellor's cautious queries had elicited nothing.

Lanterns burned on. The traditional torches breathed out smoke, their flickering light licking the walls. Triban Gnol stood, hands folded, waiting.

Within Rhulad's head battles were being waged. Armies of will and desire contested with the raving forces of fear and doubt. The field was sodden

with blood and littered with fallen heroes. Or into his skull some blinding fog had rolled in, oppressive as oblivion itself, and Rhulad wandered lost.

He sat as if carved, clothed in stained wealth, the product of a mad artist's vision. Lacquered eyes and scarred flesh, twisted mouth and black strands of greasy hair.

Sculpted solid to the throne to cajole symbols of permanence and imprisonment, but this madness had lost all subtlety – ever the curse of fascism, the tyranny of gleeful servility that could not abide subversion.

*Look upon him, and see what comes when justice is vengeance. When challenge is criminal. When scepticism is treason. Call upon them, Emperor! Your father, your mother. Call them to stand before you in this inverted nightmare of fidelity, and unleash your wrath!*

'Now,' Rhulad said in a croak.

The Chancellor gestured to a guard near the side door, who turned in a soft rustle of armour and brushed his gauntleted hand upon the ornate panel. A moment later it opened.

All of this was occurring to the Errant's left, along the same wall he leaned against, so he could not see what occurred then beyond, barring a few indistinct words.

Tomad and Uruth Sengar strode into the throne room, halting in the tiled circle. Both then bowed to their Emperor.

Rhulad licked his broken lips. 'They are kin,' he said.

A frown from Tomad.

'Enslaved by humans. They deserved our liberation, did they not?'

'From the Isle of Sepik, Emperor?' asked Uruth. 'Are these of whom you speak?'

'They were indeed liberated,' Tomad said, nodding.

Rhulad leaned forward. 'Enslaved kin. Liberated. Then why, dear Father, do they now rot in chains?'

Tomad seemed unable to answer, a look of confusion on his lined face.

'Awaiting your disposition,' Uruth said. 'Emperor, we have sought audience with you many times since our return. Alas,' she glanced over at Triban Gnol, 'the Chancellor sends us away. Without fail.'

'And so,' Rhulad said in a rasp, 'you proclaimed them guests of the empire as was their right, then settled them where? Why, not in our many fine residences surrounding the palace. No. You chose the trenches – the pits alongside debtors, traitors and murderers. Is this your notion of the Guest Gift in your household, Tomad? Uruth? Strange, for I do not recall in my youth this most profound betrayal of Tiste Edur custom. *Not in the House of my family!* '

'Rhulad. Emperor,' Tomad said, almost stepping back in the face of his son's rage, 'have you seen these kin of ours? They are . . . pathetic. To look upon them is to feel stained. Dirtied. Their spirits are crushed. They have been made a mockery of all that is Tiste Edur. This was the crime the humans of Sepik committed against our blood, and for that we answered, Emperor. That island is now dead.'

'Kin,' the Emperor whispered. 'Explain to me, Father, for I do not understand. You perceive the crime and deliver the judgement, yes, in the name of Edur blood. No matter how fouled, no matter how decrepit. Indeed, those details are without relevance – they in no way affect the punishment, except perhaps to make it all the more severe. All of this, Father, is a single thread of thought, and it runs true. Yet there is another, isn't there? A twisted, knotted thing. One where the victims of those humans are undeserving of our regard, where they must be hidden away, left to rot like filth.

'What, then, were you avenging?

'Where – oh where, Father – is the Guest Gift? Where is the honour that binds all Tiste Edur? Where, Tomad Sengar, where, in all this, is my will? *I am Emperor and the face of the empire is mine and mine alone!* '

As the echoes of that shriek rebounded in the throne room, reluctant to fade, neither Uruth nor Tomad seemed able to speak. Their grey faces were

the colour of ash.

Triban Gnol, standing a few paces behind and to the right of the two Edur, looked like a penitent priest, his eyes down on the floor. But the Errant, whose senses could reach out with a sensitivity that far surpassed that of any mortal, could hear the hammering of that old man's wretched heart; could almost smell the dark glee concealed behind his benign, vaguely rueful expression.

Uruth seemed to shake herself then, slowly straightening. 'Emperor,' she said, 'we cannot know your will when we are barred from seeing you. Is it the Chancellor's privilege to deny the Emperor's own parents? The Emperor's own blood? And what of all the other Tiste Edur? Emperor, a wall has been raised around you. A Letherii wall.'

The Errant heard Triban Gnol's heart stutter in its cage. 'Majesty!' the Chancellor cried in indignation. 'No such wall exists! You are protected, yes. Indeed. From all who would harm you—'

'Harm him?' Tomad shouted, wheeling on the Chancellor. 'He is our son!'

'Assuredly not you, Tomad Sengar. Nor you, Uruth. Perhaps the protection necessary around a ruler might seem to you a wall, but—'

'We would speak to him!'

'From you,' Rhulad said in a dreadful rasp, 'I would hear nothing. Your words are naught but lies. You both lie to me, as Hannan Mosag lies, as every one of my fellow Tiste Edur lies. Do you imagine I cannot smell the stench of your fear? Your hatred? No, I will hear neither of you. However, you shall hear me.'

The Emperor slowly leaned back in his throne, his eyes hard. 'Our kin will be set free. This I command. They will be set free. For you, my dear parents, it seems a lesson is required. You left them to rot in darkness. In the ships. In the trench-pits. From these egregious acts, I can only assume that you do not possess any comprehension of the horror of such ordeals. Therefore it is my judgement that you must taste something of what you inflicted upon our kin. You will both spend two months interred in the

dungeon crypts of the Fifth Wing. You will live in darkness, fed once a day through chutes in the ceilings of your cells. You will have no-one but each other with whom to speak. You will be shackled. In darkness – do you understand, Uruth? True darkness. No shadows for you to manipulate, no power to whisper in your ear. In that time, I suggest you both think long of what Guest Gift means to a Tiste Edur, of honouring our kin no matter how far they have fallen. Of what it truly means to liberate.' Rhulad waved his free hand. 'Send them away, Chancellor. I am made ill by their betrayal of our own kin.'

The Errant, very nearly as stunned as were Tomad and Uruth, missed whatever gesture Triban Gnol used to summon forth the Letherii guards. They appeared quickly, as if conjured from thin air, and closed round Tomad and Uruth.

Letherii hands, iron-scaled and implacable, closed about Tiste Edur arms.

And the Errant knew that the end had begun.

Samar Dev's hope of ending things before they began did not last long. She was still four strides from Karsa Orlong when he reached Icarium and Taralack Veed. The Toblakai had approached from the side, almost behind the Jhag – who had turned to contemplate the canal's murky waters – and she watched as the huge warrior reached out one hand, grasped Icarium by an upper arm, and swung him round.

Taralack Veed lunged to break that grip and his head was snapped by a punch that seemed almost casual. The Gral collapsed onto the pavestones and did not move.

Icarium was staring down at the hand clutching his left arm, his expression vaguely perturbed.

'Karsa!' Samar Dev shouted, as heads turned and citizens – those who had witnessed Taralack Veed's fate – moved away. 'If you've killed the Gral—'

'He is nothing,' Karsa said in a growl, his eyes fixed on Icarium. 'Your last minder, Jhag, was far more formidable. Now you stand here with no-one to attack me from behind.'

'Karsa, he is unarmed.'

'But I am not.'

Icarium was still studying that battered hand gripping his arm – the red weals of scarring left by shackles encircling the thick wrist, the dots and dashes of old tattoos – as if the Jhag was unable to comprehend its function. Then he glanced over at Samar Dev, and his face brightened in a warm smile. 'Ah, witch. Both Taxilian and Varat Taun have spoken highly of you. Would that we had met earlier – although I have seen you from across the compound—'

'She is not your problem,' Karsa said. 'I am your problem.'

Icarium slowly turned and met the Toblakai's eyes. 'You are Karsa Orlong, who does not understand what it means to spar. How many comrades have you crippled?'

'They are not comrades. Nor are you.'

'What about me?' Samar Dev demanded. 'Am I not a comrade of yours, Karsa?'

He scowled. 'What of it?'

'Icarium is unarmed. If you kill him here you will not face the Emperor. No, you will find yourself in chains. At least until your head gets lopped off.'

'I have told you before, witch. Chains do not hold me.'

'You want to face the Emperor, don't you?'

'And if this one kills him first?' Karsa demanded, giving the arm a shake that clearly startled Icarium.

'Is that the problem?' Samar Dev asked. *And is that why you're crippling other champions? Not that any will play with you any more, you brainless bully.*

'You wish to face Emperor Rhulad before I do?' Icarium inquired.

'I do not ask for your permission, Jhag.'

'Yet I give it nonetheless, Karsa Orlong. You are welcome to Rhulad.'

Karsa glared at Icarium who, though not as tall, somehow still seemed able to meet the Toblakai eye to eye without lifting his head.

Then something odd occurred. Samar Dev saw a slight widening of Karsa's eyes as he studied Icarium's face. 'Yes,' he said in a gruff voice. 'I see it now.'

'I am pleased,' replied Icarium.

'See what?' Samar Dev demanded.

On the ground behind her Taralack Veed groaned, coughed, then rolled onto his side and was sick.

Karsa released the Jhag's arm and stepped back. 'You are good to your word?'

Icarium bowed slightly then said, 'How could I not be?'

'That is true. Icarium, I witness.'

The Jhag bowed a second time.

'Keep your hands away from that sword!'

This shout brought them all round, to see a half-dozen Letherii guards edging closer, their weapons unsheathed.

Karsa sneered at them. 'I am returning to the compound, children. Get out of my way.'

They parted like reeds before a canoe's prow as the Toblakai marched forward, then moved into his wake, hurrying to keep up with Karsa's long strides.

Samar Dev stared after them, then loosed a sudden yelp, before clapping her hands to her mouth.

'You remind me of Senior Assessor, doing that,' Icarium observed with another smile. His gaze lifted past her. 'And yes, there he remains, my very own personal vulture. If I gesture him to us, do you think he will come, witch?'

She shook her head, still struggling with an overwhelming flood of relief and the aftermath of terror's cold clutch that even now made her hands tremble. 'No, he prefers to worship from a distance.'

'Worship? The man is deluded. Samar Dev, will you inform him of that?'

'As you like, but it won't matter, Icarium. His people, you see, they remember you.'

'Do they now.' Icarium's eyes narrowed slightly on the Senior Assessor, who had begun to cringe from the singular attention of his god.

*Spirits below, why was I interested in this monk in the first place? There is no lure to the glow of fanatical worship. There is only smug intransigence and the hidden knives of sharp judgement.*

'Perhaps,' said Icarium, 'I must speak to him after all.'

'He'll run away.'

'In the compound, then—'

'Where you can corner him?'

The Jhag smiled. 'Proof of my omnipotence.'

Sirryn Kanar's exultation was like a cauldron on the boil, the heavy lid moments from stuttering loose, yet he had held himself down on the long walk into the crypts of the Fifth Wing, where the air was wet enough to taste, where mould skidded beneath their boots and the dank chill reached tendrils to their very bones.

This, then, would be the home of Tomad and Uruth Sengar for the next two months, and Sirryn could not be more pleased. In the light of the lanterns the guards carried he saw, with immense satisfaction, that certain look on the Edur faces, the one that settled upon the expression of every

prisoner: the numbed disbelief, the shock and fear stirring in the eyes every now and then, until they were once more overwhelmed by that stupid refusal to accept reality.

He would take sexual pleasure this night, he knew, as if this moment now was but one half of desire's dialogue. He would sleep satiated, content with the world. His world.

They walked the length of the lowest corridor until reaching the very end. Sirryn gestured that Tomad be taken to the cell on the left; Uruth into the one opposite. He watched as the Edur woman, with a last glance back at her husband, turned and accompanied her three Letherii guards. A moment later Sirryn followed.

'I know that you are the more dangerous,' he said to her as one of his guards bent to fix the shackle onto her right ankle. 'There are shadows here, so long as we remain.'

'I leave your fate to others,' she replied.

He studied her for a moment. 'You shall be forbidden visitors.'

'Yes.'

'The shock goes away.'

She looked at him, and he saw in her eyes raw contempt.

'In its place,' he continued, 'comes despair.'

'Begone, you wretched man.'

Sirryn smiled. 'Take her cloak. Why should Tomad be the only one to suffer the chill?'

She pushed the guard's hand away and unlocked the clasp herself.

'You were foolish enough to refuse the Edur Gift,' he said, 'so now you receive' – he waved at the tiny cell with its dripping ceiling, its streaming walls – 'the Letherii gift. Granted with pleasure.'

When she made no reply, Sirryn turned about. 'Come,' he said to his guards, 'let us leave them to their darkness.'

As the last echoes of their footfalls faded, Feather Witch moved out from the cell in which she had been hiding. Guests had arrived in her private world. Unwelcome. These were her corridors; the uneven stones beneath her feet, the slick, slimy walls within her reach, the sodden air, the reek of rot, the very darkness itself – these all belonged to her.

Tomad and Uruth Sengar. Uruth, who had once owned Feather Witch. Well, there was justice in that. Feather Witch was Letherii, after all, and who could now doubt that the grey tide had turned?

She crept out into the corridor, her moccasin-clad feet noiseless on the slumped floor, then hesitated. Did she wish to look upon them? To voice her mockery of their plight? The temptation was strong. But no, better to remain unseen, unknown to them.

And they were now speaking to each other. She drew closer to listen.

'. . . not long,' Tomad was saying. 'This, more than anything else, wife, forces our hand. Hannan Mosag will approach the women and an alliance will be forged—' 'Do not be so sure of that,' Uruth replied. 'We have not forgotten the truth of the Warlock King's ambition. This is of his making—'

'Move past that – there is no choice.'

'Perhaps. But concessions will be necessary and that will be difficult, for we do not trust him. Oh, he will give his word, no doubt. As you say, there is no choice. But what value Hannan Mosag's word? His soul is poisoned. He still lusts for that sword, for the power it holds. And that we will not give him. Never within his reach. Never!'

There was a rustle of chains, then Tomad spoke: 'He did not sound mad, Uruth.'

'No,' she replied in a low voice. 'He did not.'

'He was right in his outrage.'

'Yes.'

'As were we, on Sepik, when we saw how far our kin had fallen. Their misery, their surrender of all will, all pride, all identity. They were once Tiste Edur! Had we known that from the first—'

'We would have left them, husband?'

Silence, then: 'No. Vengeance against the Malazans was necessary. But for our sake, not that of our kin. Rhulad misunderstood that.'

'He did not. Tomad, those kin suffered the holds of the fleet. They suffered the pits. Rhulad did not misunderstand. We were punishing them for their failure. That, too, was vengeance. Against our very own blood.'

Bitterness now in Tomad's voice: 'You said nothing when judgement was cast, wife. Please yourself with this false wisdom if you like. If it is what I must hear from you, then I'd rather silence.'

'Then, husband, you shall have it.'

Feather Witch eased back. Yes, Hannan Mosag would be told. And what would he then do? Seek out the Edur women? She hoped not. If Feather Witch possessed a true enemy, it was they. Was the Warlock King their match? In deceit, most certainly. But in power? Not any more. Unless, of course, he had hidden allies.

She would need to speak with the Errant. With her god.

She would need to force some . . . concessions.

Smiling, Feather Witch slipped her way up the corridor.

The fate of Tomad and Uruth Sengar drifted through her mind, then passed on, leaving scarce a ripple.

One subterranean tunnel of the Old Palace stretched inland almost to the junction of the Main Canal and Creeper Canal. This passage had been bricked in at three separate locations, and these barriers Hannan Mosag had left in place, twisting reality with Kurald Emurlahn in order to pass through them, as he had done this time with Bruthen Trana in tow.

The Warlock King's followers had kept the warrior hidden for some time now, whilst Hannan Mosag worked his preparations, and this had not been an easy task. It was not as if the palace was astir with search parties and the like – the fever of confusion and fear was endemic these days, after all. People vanished with disturbing regularity, especially among the Tiste Edur. No, the difficulty resided with Bruthen Trana himself.

*A strong-willed man. But this will do us well, provided I can pound into his skull the fact that impatience is a weakness.* A warrior needed resolve, true enough, but there was a time and there was a place, and both had yet to arrive.

Hannan Mosag had led Bruthen to the chamber at the very end of the tunnel, an octagonal room of ill-fitted stones. The angular domed ceiling overhead, tiled in once bright but now black copper, was so low the room felt like a hut.

When the Warlock King had first found this chamber, it and at least forty paces of the tunnel had been under water, the depth following the downward gradient until the black, murky sludge very nearly brushed the chamber's ceiling.

Hannan Mosag had drained the water through a modest rent that led into the realm of the Nascent, which he then closed, moving quickly in his crab-like scrabble to drag seven bundled arm-length shafts of Blackwood down the slimy corridor and into the chamber. It had begun refilling, of course, and the Warlock King sloshed his way to the centre, where he untied the bundle, then began constructing an octagonal fence, each stick a hand's width in from the walls, two to each side, held mostly upright in the thick sludge covering the floor. When he had completed this task, he called upon his fullest unveiling of Kurald Emurlahn.

At a dreadful cost. Seeking to purge the power of all chaos, of the poisonous breath of the Crippled God, he was almost unequal to the task. His malformed flesh, his twisted bones, the thin, blackened blood in his veins and arteries; these now served the malign world of the Fallen One, forming a symbiosis of life and power. It had been so long since he had last

felt – truly felt – the purity of Kurald Emurlahn that, even in its fragmented, weakened state, he very nearly recoiled at its burning touch.

With the air reeking of scorched flesh and singed hair, Hannan Mosag sought to force sanctification upon the chamber. Trapping the power of Shadow in this, his new, private temple. An entire night of struggle, the cold water ever rising, his legs numb, he began to feel his concentration tearing apart. In desperation – feeling it all slipping away – he called upon Father Shadow.

Scabandari.

Despairing, knowing that he had failed—

And sudden power, pure and resolute, burgeoned in the chamber. Boiling away the water in roiling gusts of steam, until oven-dry heat crackled from the stone walls. The mud on the floor hardened, cementing the Blackwood shafts.

That heat reached into Hannan Mosag's flesh, down to grip his very bones. He had shrieked in agony, even as a new kind of life spread through him.

It had not healed him; had done nothing to straighten his bones or unclench scarred tissue.

No, it had been more like a promise, a whispering invitation to some blessed future. Fading in a dozen heartbeats, yet the memory of that promise remained with Hannan Mosag.

Scabandari, Father Shadow, still lived. Torn from bone and flesh, true, but the spirit remained. Answering his desperate prayer, gifting this place with sanctity.

*I have found the path. I can see the end.*

Now he crouched on the hard, desiccated ground and Bruthen Trana – forced to hunch slightly because of the low ceiling – stood at his side. The Warlock King gestured to the centre of the chamber. 'There, warrior. You

must lie down. The ritual is readied, but I warn you, the journey will be long and difficult.'

'I do not understand this, Warlock King. This . . . this temple. It is true Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Yes, Bruthen Trana. Blessed by the power of Father Shadow himself. Warrior, your journey itself is so blessed. Does this not tell you that we are on the right path?'

Bruthen Trana stared down at him, was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, 'You, among all others, should have been turned away. By Father Shadow. Your betrayal—'

'My betrayal means nothing,' the Warlock King snapped. 'Warrior, we are blessed! This place, it is not simply a temple of Kurald Emurlahn! It is a temple of Scabandari! Of our god himself! The very first such temple in this realm – do you not grasp what that means? He is coming back. To us.'

'Then perhaps what we seek is pointless,' Bruthen replied.

'What?'

'Scabandari will return, and he will stand before Rhulad Sengar. Tell me, will your Crippled God risk that confrontation?'

'Do not be a fool, Bruthen Trana. You ask the wrong question. Will Scabandari risk that confrontation? Upon the very moment of his return? We cannot know Father Shadow's power, but I believe he will be weak, exhausted. No, warrior, it is for us to protect him upon his return. Protect, and nourish.'

'Has Fear Sengar found him then?'

Hannan Mosag's dark eyes narrowed. 'What do you know of that, Bruthen Trana?'

'Only what most Edur know. Fear left, to seek out Father Shadow. In answer to his brother. In answer to you, Warlock King.'

'Clearly,' Hannan Mosag said in a tight voice, 'there has been a reconciliation.'

'Perhaps there has. You did not answer my question.'

'I cannot. For I do not know.'

'Do you dissemble yet again?'

'Your accusation is unjust, Bruthen Trana.'

'Let us begin this ritual. Tell me, will I journey in the flesh?'

'No. You would die, and instantly, warrior. No, we must tug free your spirit.'

Hannan Mosag watched as Bruthen Trana moved to the centre of the chamber. The warrior divested himself of his sword and belt and lay down on his back.

'Close your eyes,' the Warlock King said, crawling closer. 'Lead your mind into the comfort of Shadow. You shall feel my touch, upon your chest. Shortly after, all sense of your physical body will vanish. Open your eyes then, and you will find yourself . . . elsewhere.'

'How will I know when I have found the path I seek?'

'By virtue of seeking, you will find, Bruthen Trana. Now, silence please. I must concentrate.'

A short time later the Warlock King reached out and settled his hand upon the warrior's chest.

As easy as that.

The body lying before him drew no breath. Left alone for too long it would begin to rot. But this was sanctified ground, alive now with the power of Kurald Emurlahn. There would be no decay. There would, for the body, be no passage of time at all.

Hannan Mosag pulled himself closer. He began searching Bruthen Trana's clothing. The warrior had something hidden on him – something with an

aura of raw power that struck the Warlock King's senses like a stench. He worked through the pockets on the underside of the warrior's leather cloak and found naught but a tattered note of some kind. He emptied the coin pouch tied to the sword-belt. A lone polished stone, black as onyx but nothing more than wave-eroded obsidian. Three docks – the local Letherii currency. And nothing else. With growing irritation, Hannan Mosag began stripping the warrior.

Nothing. Yet he could smell it, permeating the clothing.

Snarling, Hannan Mosag settled back, his hands twitching.

*He's taken it with him. That should have been impossible. Yet . . . what other possibility is there?*

His fevered gaze found the crumpled note. Collecting it, he flattened the linen and read what had been written there.

At first he could make no sense of the statement – no, not a statement, he realized. A confession. A signature he had not seen before, so stylized in the Letherii fashion as to be indecipherable. Moments later, his mind racing, revelation arrived.

His eyes lifted, fixed upon Bruthen Trana's now naked form. 'What deceit were you planning with this, warrior? Perhaps you are cleverer than I had imagined.' He paused, then smiled. 'No matter now.'

The Warlock King drew his dagger. 'Some blood, yes, to seal the sacred life of my temple. Scabandari, you would understand this. Yes. The necessity.'

He crawled up beside Bruthen Trana. 'Deliver the one we seek, warrior. Yes. Beyond that, alas, my need for you ends.' He raised the knife, then drove it hard into the warrior's heart.

Glancing over at Bugg, Tehol Beddict saw his manservant complete an entire turn, his eyes tracking the huge Tarthenal as if they had been nailed to the barbaric warrior with his absurd stone sword. The cordon of guards flanking the giant looked appropriately terrified. 'Well,' Tehol said, 'he's no Ublala Pung, now is he?'

Bugg did not even seem to hear him.

'Oh, be like that, then. I think I want to talk to that other one – what did you call him? Oh yes, the Jhag. Any person who would not flinch in the grip of that Tarthenal is either brainless or – oh, not a pleasant thought – even scarier. Perhaps it would do to hesitate at this moment, mindful as ever of loyal manservant's advice . . . no? No it is. So please, do stand there like a man whose heart has just dropped through to lodge somewhere underneath his spliver or some such organ I don't want to know about. Yes, then, do that.'

Tehol set off towards the Jhag. The other savage who had been punched unconscious by the Tarthenal – the Tarthenal whom Ublala Pung had broken into the compound to find – was now sitting up, looking dazedly about. Blood still streamed from his thoroughly broken nose. The woman, attractive in an earthy way, Tehol noted again, was speaking to the tattooed giant, while a dozen paces away a foreigner stood gazing with something like awe upon either the woman or the Jhag.

In all, Tehol decided, an interesting scenario. Interesting enough to interrupt in his usual charming manner. As he drew closer, he spread his arms and announced, 'Time, I think, for a more proper welcome to our fair city!' And his blanket slipped down to gather at his feet.

Bugg, alas, missed this delightful introduction, for even as his eyes had clung to the Toblakai, so he found himself walking, following, step after step, as the warrior and his escort marched towards the Champion's Compound – or whatever unintentionally ironic name the guileless officials of the palace had named it. They had come to within a street of the walled enclosure when all hopes of continuing came to a sudden but confused end. For the street was filled with people.

Emaciated, fouled with excrement, mostly naked flesh covered in welts and sores, they packed the street like abandoned children, lost and forlorn, blinking in the harsh afternoon sun. Hundreds of the wretched creatures.

The Toblakai's guards halted at this unexpected barrier, and Bugg saw the foremost one reel back as if assailed by a stench, then turn to argue with the

others. Their 'prisoner', on the other hand, simply bellowed at the mob to clear the way, then walked on, shouldering through the press.

He had gone perhaps twenty paces when he too drew to a halt. Shoulders and head above the crowd, he glared about, then shouted in a rude version of Malazan: 'I know you! Once slaves of Sepik Island! Hear me!'

Faces swung round. The crowd shifted on all sides, forming a rough circle.

*They hear. They are desperate to hear.*

'I, Karsa Orlong, will give answer! So I vow. Your kin refuse you. They cast you out. You live or you die and neither matters to them. Nor to any in this cursed land. To your fate I offer nothing! In vengeance for what has been done to you, I offer everything. Now, go your way – your chains are gone. Go, so that never again will they return to you!' With that, the Toblakai warrior moved on, towards the compound's main gate.

*Not precisely what they needed to hear, I think. Not yet, anyway. In time, I suspect, it may well return to them.*

*No, this – here and now – this demands another kind of leadership.*

The guards had retreated, seeking another route.

The few citizens within sight were doing the same. Noone wanted to see this legacy.

Bugg pushed himself forward. He drew upon his power, felt it struggle at this unseemly purpose. *Damn my worshippers – whoever, wherever you are. I will have my way here!* Power, devoid of sympathy, cold as the sea, dark as the depths. *I will have my way.*

'Close your eyes,' he said to the mob. The words were little more than a whisper, yet all heard them, solid and undeniable in their minds. *Close your eyes.*

They did. Children, women, men. Motionless now. Eyes closed tight, breaths held in sudden tension, perhaps even fear – but Bugg suspected that

these people were beyond fear. They waited for what would come next. And did not move.

*I will have my way.* 'Hear me. There is a place of safety. Far from here. I will send you there. Now. Friends will find you. They will bring healing, and you will have food, clothing and shelter. When you feel the ground shift beneath you, open your eyes to your new home.'

The sea did not forgive. Its power was hunger and swelling rage. The sea warred with the shore, with the very sky. The sea wept for no-one.

Bugg did not care.

Like any tidal pool motionless under the hot sun, his blood had grown . . . heated. And the smallest pool was filled with the promise of an ocean, a score of oceans – all their power could be held in a single drop of water. Such was Denaeth Rusen, such was Ruse, the warren where life was first born. *And there, in that promise of life itself, will I find what I need.*

Of empathy.

Of warmth.

The power, when it came, was a true current. Angry, yes, yet true. Water had known life for so long it held no memory of purity. Power and gift had become one, and so it yielded to its god.

And he sent them away.

Bugg opened his eyes, and saw before him an empty street.

In his room once more, Karsa Orlong lifted free his shoulder scabbard, then, holding the weapon and its harness in his hands, he stared down at the long table, on which sat an oil lantern set on low burn. After a moment he laid the sword and rigging down. And grew still once more.

Many things to consider, a heaving of foam and froth from some struck well deep within him. The slaves. Cast out because their lives were meaningless. Both these Edur and the Letherii were heartless, yet cowards. Eager to turn away from witnessing the cost of their indifference. Content to strip fellowship from any whenever it suited them.

Yet they would call him the barbarian.

If so, then he was well pleased with the distinction.

And, true to his savagely clear vision of right and wrong, he would hold in his mind that scene – those starved faces, the liquid eyes that seemed to shine so bright he felt burned by their touch – hold to it when he faced Emperor Rhulad. When he then faced every Letherii and every Edur who chose to stand in his way.

So he had vowed, and so all would witness.

This cold thought held him motionless for another dozen heartbeats, then a second image returned to him. Icarium, the one they called Lifestealer.

He had been moments from breaking that Jhag's neck.

And then he had seen in the ash-skinned face . . . something. And with it, recognition.

He would yield to Karsa. He had given his word, and Karsa now knew that would not be broken.

There was Jhag blood in this Icarium, but of that Karsa knew little. Father or mother a Jaghut; it hardly mattered which.

Yet the other parent. Father or mother. Well, he had seen enough in Icarium's face to know that blood. To know it like the whisper of his very own.

Toblakai.

In his opulent office, Chancellor Triban Gnol slowly sat down with uncharacteristic caution. A dust-laden, sweat- and blood-stained Letherii soldier stood before him, flanked on his right by Sirryn Kanar, whose return from the crypts had coincided with the arrival of this messenger.

Triban Gnol looked away from the exhausted soldier. He would call in the scrub-slaves afterwards, to wash down the floor where the man now stood; to scent the air once again with pine oil. Eyes on a lacquered box on the desktop before him, he asked, 'How many did you come in with, Corporal?'

'Three others. And an Edur.'

Triban Gnol's head snapped up. 'Where is he now?'

'Died not three steps into the Domicile's grand entrance, sir.'

'Indeed? Died?'

'He was grievously wounded, sir. And I knew enough to prevent any healer reaching him in time. I moved close to help him as he staggered, and gave the arrow in his back a few twists, then a deeper push. He passed out with the pain of that, and as I caught him and lowered him to the floor, I closed my thumb upon the great artery in his neck. I was able to hold that grip for thirty or more heartbeats. That was more than the Edur could withstand.'

'And you a mere corporal in my employ? I think not. Sirryn, after we are done here, draft a promotion for this man.'

'Yes, Chancellor.'

'And so,' Triban Gnol resumed, 'being of rank among the remaining Letherii, the responsibility for reporting fell to you.'

'Yes sir.'

'I need the names of the others.'

The corporal seemed to flinch. 'Sir, without my soldiers, I would never have—'

'I understand your loyalty, and I commend you. Alas, we must face this situation with a clear eye. We must recognize necessity. Those soldiers are not mine. Not like you.'

'They are loyal, sir—'

'To whom? To what? No, the risk is too great. I will grant you this gift, however.' The Chancellor's gaze flicked to Sirryn. 'Quick and painless. No interrogation.'

Sirryn's brows rose. 'None?'

'None.'

'As you command, sir.'

The corporal licked his lips, and then, clearly forcing out the words, he said, 'I thank you, sir.'

The Chancellor's nod was distracted, his gaze once more on the gleaming box of Blackwood on his desk. 'I would ask again,' he said, 'there was no indication of who they were? No formal declaration of war?'

'Nothing like that at all, sir,' the corporal replied. 'Hundreds of burning ships – that was their declaration of war. And even then, they seemed . . . few. No army – no sign at all of the landing.'

'Yet there was one.'

'Errant fend, yes! Sir, I rode with twenty Letherii, veterans all, and six Tiste Edur of the Arapay. Edur magic or not, we were ambushed in a clearing behind an abandoned homestead. One moment – thinking to make our camp – we were reining in amidst the high grasses – alone – and the next there was thunder and fire, and bodies flying – flying, sir, through the air. Or just limbs. Pieces. And arrows hissing in the dusk.'

'Yet your troop recovered.'

But the corporal shook his head. 'The Edur commanding us – he knew that the news we were bringing to the capital – that of the burning ships and the dead Tiste bodies on the roads – that news demanded that we disengage. As many of us as could fight clear. Sir, with the Edur in the lead, we bolted. Seven of us at first – they had killed the other five Edur in the first breath of the attack – seven, then five.'

'Did this enemy pursue?' Triban Gnol asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

'No sir. They had no horses – none that we saw in any case.'

The Chancellor simply nodded at that. Then asked, 'Human?'

'Yes sir. But not Letherii, not tribal either, from what we could see. Sir, they used crossbows, but not the small, weak fisher bows such as we use in

the shallows during the carp run. No, these were weapons of blackened iron, with thick cords and quarrels that punched through armour and shield. I saw one of my soldiers knocked flat onto his back by one such quarrel, dead in the instant. And—'

He halted when Triban Gnol raised a perfectly manicured finger.

'A moment, soldier. A moment. Something you said.' The Chancellor looked up. 'Five of the six Edur, killed at the very beginning of the ambush. And the discovery of Edur corpses on the roads leading in from the coast. No Letherii bodies on those roads?'

'None that we found, sir, no.'

'Yet the sixth Edur survived that initial strike in the glade – how?'

'It must have seemed that he didn't. The quarrel in his back, sir, the one that eventually killed him. He was sent tumbling from his saddle. I doubt any one expected him to rise again, to regain his mount—'

'You saw all this with your own eyes?'

'I did, sir.'

'That quarrel – before or after the thunder and fire?'

The corporal frowned, then said, 'Before. Just before – not even a blink from one to the next, I think. Yes, I am certain. He was the very first struck.'

'Because he was clearly in command?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'This thunder and fire, where did the sorcery strike first? Let me answer that for myself. In the midst of the remaining Edur.'

'Yes sir.'

'You may go now, soldier. Sirryn, remain with me a moment.'

As soon as the door closed Triban Gnol was on his feet. 'Errant fend! A damned invasion! Against the Letherii Empire!'

'Sounds more like against the Edur,' Sirryn ventured.

The Chancellor glared across at him. 'You damned fool. That is incidental – an interesting detail at most. Without true relevance. Sirryn, the Edur rule us – perhaps only in name, yes, but they are our occupiers. In our midst. Able to command Letherii forces as befits their need.'

He slammed a fist down on the table. The lacquered box jumped, the lid clattering free. Triban Gnol stared at what lay within. 'We are at war,' he said. 'Not our war – not the one we planned for – no. War!'

'We will crush these invaders, sir—'

'Of course we will, once we meet their sorcery with our own. That too is not relevant.'

'I do not understand, sir.'

Triban Gnol glared at the man. *No, you don't. Which is why your rank will never rise higher, you pathetic thug.* 'When you are done with silencing the other soldiers, Sirryn – oh yes, and the promotion for our enterprising young corporal – I want you to deliver, by hand, a message to Karos Invictad.'

'Sir?'

'An invitation. He is to come to the palace.'

'When?'

'Immediately.'

Sirryn saluted. 'Yes, sir.'

'Go.'

As the door closed a second time, Triban Gnol stared down at his desk. Down into the box with its dislodged lid. Wherein sat a small, squat bottle. A third of its contents remaining.

Triban Gnol often drew satisfaction from the sight of it, the very knowledge of it when hidden within its box. He would recall pouring the

contents into the vessel of wine from which he knew Ezgara Diskanar would drink, there on that last terrible day. In the throne room. Ezgara, and that pathetic First Eunuch. Nisall should have followed. Not Brys. No, anyone but Brys Beddict.

Regrettable, that.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Every field of battle
holds every cry uttered
Threaded like roots
between stones
and broken armour,
shattered weapons,
leather clasps rotting
into the earth.
Centuries are as nothing
to those voices,
those aggrieved souls.
They die in the now
And the now is for ever.

*On the Deal Plains*
Rael of Longspit

Fire had taken the grasses. Wind and water had taken the soil. The level stretch where the two drainage channels debouched was a scatter of button cacti, fist-sized cobbles and fire-cracked rock. The Letherii outrider's corpse had rolled down from the ridge leaving a path of spattered blood now black as ink on the rocks. Coyotes, wolves or perhaps Awl dogs had chewed away the softer tissues – face and gut, buttocks and inner thighs – leaving the rest to the flies and their maggot spawn.

Overseer Brohl Handar – who knew he should have died at Bast Fulmar, had indeed believed at that last moment that he would, absurdly killed by his own sword – gestured to two of his troop to remain on the ridge and waved the others to the highest rise thirty paces away, on the other side of one of the gullies, then walked his horse down onto the flat. Steeling himself against the stench of the dead soldier, he forced his reluctant mount closer.

The K'risnan had reached him in time. With the power to heal, a power pure – no stain of chaos – that was, Brohl Handar now understood, a blessing. Kurald Emurlahn. Darkness reborn. He would not question it, would not doubt it. *Blessing*.

The stub of an arrow jutted from the outrider's throat. His weapons had been taken, as had the vest of fine chain beneath the light tanned leather shirt. There was no sign of the Letherii's horse. The buzz of the flies seemed preternaturally loud.

Brohl Handar wheeled his mount round and guided it back up onto the ridge. He spoke to the Sollanta scout. 'Tracks?'

'Just his horse, Overseer,' the warrior replied. 'The ambusher was, I believe, on foot.'

Brohl nodded. This had been the pattern. The Awl were collecting horses, weapons and armour. The Atri-Preda had since commanded that no outrider scout alone. To this Redmask would no doubt add more ambushers.

'The Awl rode southeast, Overseer.'

Days ago, alas. There was no point in pursuing.

Eyes narrowed against the harsh sunlight, Brohl Handar scanned the plain on all sides. How could a warrior hide in this empty land? The drainage gullies had seemed an obvious answer, and as soon as one was spotted a troop would dismount, advance on foot, and plunge into it seeking to flush out the enemy. All they had found were bedded deer and coyote dens.

Areas of high grasses were virtually attacked, both mounted and on foot. Again, nothing but the occasional deer bolting almost from the feet of some startled, cursing soldier; or ptarmigan or thrushes exploding skyward in a flurry of feathers and drumming wings.

The mages insisted that sorcery was not at work here; indeed, much of the Awl'dan seemed strangely bereft of whatever was necessary to shape magic. The valley known as Bast Fulmar had been, it was becoming clear, in no way unique. Brohl Handar had begun with the belief that the plains were but southern versions of tundra. In some ways this was true; in others it was

anything but. Horizons deceived, distances lied. Valleys hid from the eye until one was upon them. *Yet, so much like the tundra, a terrible place to fight a war.*

Redmask and his army had disappeared. Oh, there were trails aplenty; huge swaths of trodden ground wending this way and that. But some were from bhederin herds; others were old and still others seemed to indicate travel in opposite directions, overlapping back and forth until all sense was lost. And so, day after day, the Letherii forces set out, their supplies dwindling, losing outriders to ambushes, marching this way and that, as if doomed to pursue a mythic battle that would never come.

Brohl Handar had assembled thirty of his best riders, and each day he led them out from the column, pushing far onto the flanks – dangerously far – in hopes of sighting the Awl.

He now squinted at the Sollanta scout. 'Where have they gone?'

The warrior grimaced. 'I have given this some thought, Overseer. Indeed, it is all I have thought about this past week. The enemy, I believe, is all around us. After Bast Fulmar, Redmask split the tribes. Each segment employed wagons to make them indistinguishable – as we have seen from the countless trails, those wagons are drawn from side to side to side, eight or ten across, and they move last, thus obliterating signs of all that precedes them on the trail. Could be a hundred warriors ahead, could be five thousand.'

'If so,' Brohl objected, 'we should have caught up with at least one such train.'

'We do not move fast enough, Overseer. Recall, we remained encamped on the south side of Bast Fulmar for two entire days. That gave them a crucial head start. Their columns, wagons and all, move faster than ours. It is as simple as that.'

'And the Atri-Preda refuses to send out reconnaissance in force,' Brohl said, nodding.

'A wise decision,' the scout said.

'How so?'

'Redmask would turn on such a force. He would overwhelm it and slaughter every soldier in it. Either way, Overseer, we are playing his game.'

'That is . . . unacceptable.'

'I imagine the Atri-Preda agrees with you, sir.'

'What can be done?'

The warrior's brows lifted. 'I do not command this army, Overseer.'

*Nor do I.* 'If you did?'

Sudden unease in the scout's face and he glanced over at the other outrider with them on the ridge, but that man seemed intent on something else, far off on the horizon, as he tore loose bits of dried meat from the thin strip in his left hand, and slowly chewed.

'Never mind,' Brohl said, sighing. 'An unfair question.'

'Yet I would answer still, Overseer, if you like.'

'Go on.'

'Retreat, sir. Back to Drene. Resume claiming land, and protect it well. Redmask, then, will have to come to us, if he would contest the theft of Awl land.'

*I agree. But she will not have it.* 'Sound the recall,' he said.

'We're returning to the column.'

* * *

The sun had crawled past noon by the time the Tiste Edur troop came within sight of the Letherii column, and it was immediately evident that something had happened. Supply wagons were drawn into a hollow square formation, the oxen and mules already unhitched and led into two separate kraals within that defensive array. Elements of the various brigades and regiments were drawing into order both north and south of the square, with mounted troops well out east and west.

Brohl Handar led his troop into a quick canter. To his lead scout he said, 'Rejoin my Arapay – I see them to the west.'

'Yes sir.'

As the troop turned behind him, the Overseer kicked his horse into a gallop and rode for the small forest of standards marking the Atri-Preda's position, just outside the east barrier of wagons. The land here was relatively flat. Another ridge of slightly higher ground ran roughly east–west a thousand paces to the south, while the topography on this north side was more or less level with the trail, thick with the waist-high silver-bladed grass known as knifegrass, a direct translation of the Awl name, *masthebe*.

*Redmask would be a fool to meet us here.*

He eased his horse down to a fast trot as he drew nearer. He could see the Atri-Preda now, the flush of excitement on her face replacing the strain that had seemed to age her a year for every day since Bast Fulmar. She had gathered her officers, and they were now pulling away in answer to her orders. By the time the Overseer arrived only a few messengers remained, along with the standard bearer of Bivatt's own command.

He reined in. 'What has happened?'

'Seems he's grown weary of running,' Bivatt replied with a fiercely satisfied expression.

'You have found him?'

'He even now marches for us, Overseer.'

'But . . . why would he do that?'

There was a flicker of unease in her eyes, then she looked away, fixing her gaze to the southeast, where Brohl could now see a dust cloud on the horizon. 'He believes us tired, worn out. He knows we are short of food and decent forage, and that we have wagons crowded with wounded. He means to savage us yet again.'

The sweat on Brohl Handar's brow was plucked away by a gust of warm wind. Ceaseless breath of the plains, that wind, always from the west or

northwest. It devoured every drop of moisture, turning the skin leathery and burnished. Licking chapped lips, the Overseer cleared his throat, then said, 'Can sorcery be unleashed here, Atri-Preda?'

Her eyes flashed. 'Yes. And with that, we will give answer.'

'And their shamans? What of the Awl shamans?'

'Useless, Overseer. Their rituals are too slow for combat. Nor can they make use of raw power. We will have at them this day, Brohl Handar.'

'You have positioned the Tiste Edur once again to the rear. Are we to guard the dung left by the oxen, Atri-Preda?'

'Not at all. I believe you will see plenty of fighting today. There are bound to be flanking strikes, seeking our supplies, and I will need you and your Edur to throw them back. Recall, as well, those two demons.'

'They are difficult to forget,' he replied. 'Very well, we shall position ourselves defensively.' He collected his reins. 'Enjoy your battle, Atri-Preda.'

Bivatt watched the Overseer ride off, irritated with his questions, his scepticism. Redmask was as mortal as any man. He was not immune to mistakes, and this day he had made one. The defender was ever at an advantage, and the general rule was that an attacker required substantial numerical superiority. Bivatt had lost to death or wounding over eight hundred of her soldiers in the debacle that was Bast Fulmar. Even with that, Redmask did not possess sufficient numbers, assuming he intended to advance beyond initial sighting.

Ideally, she would have liked to position her forces along the ridge to the south, but there had been no time for that; and by staying where she was, she would prevent that ridge from factoring in the battle to come. There was the chance that Redmask would simply take the ridge then await her, but she would not play into his hands again. If he sought battle this day, he would have to advance. And quickly. Standing and waiting on the ridge would not be tolerated, not when Bivatt had her mages. *Stand there if you dare, Redmask, in the face of wave upon wave of sorcery.*

But he was coming. Bivatt did not believe he would seek the ridge then simply wait, expecting her to yield her defensive formation in order to march upon him.

*No, he has lost his patience. Revealed his weakness.*

She scanned the positioning of her troops. Crimson Rampant heavy infantry to anchor the far left, the easternmost end of her line. Merchants' Battalion heavy infantry to the far right. Artisan Battalion heavy infantry at the centre. To their flanks, extending out and at double-depth – twenty rather than ten lines – were the assorted medium infantry of her force. Reserve elements of her remaining skirmishers, the Drene Garrison and medium infantry were arrayed closer to the square of wagons. The Bluerose cavalry, divided into two wings, she held back to await a quick response, as either counter-attack or riding to close a breach.

Brohl Handar's Tiste Edur guarded the north. They would be facing away from the main battle, yet Bivatt was certain there would be an attack on them, another strike for the supplies. And she suspected it would come from the high grasses on the north side of the track.

Rising on her stirrups, she studied the approaching dust cloud. Her scouts had confirmed that this was indeed Redmask, leading what had to be the majority of his warriors. That haze of dust seemed to be angling towards the ridge. The Atri-Preda sneered, then gestured a messenger over. 'Bring me my mages. On the double.'

The old man had been found dead in his tent that morning. The imprints of the hands that had strangled him left a mottled map of brutality below his bloated face and bulging eyes. His murderer had sat atop him, staring down to witness death's arrival. The last elder of the Renfayar, Redmask's own tribe, perhaps the most ancient man among the entire Awl. The Blind Stalker that was death should have reached out a most gentle touch upon such a man.

In the camp fear and dismay whistled and spun like a trapped wind in a gorge, punctuated by terrible wails from the crones and cries announcing ill omen. Redmask had arrived to look down upon the corpse when it had been

carried into the open, and of course none could see what lay behind his scaled mask, but he did not fall to his knees beside the body of his kin, his wise adviser. He had stood, motionless, cadaran whip wrapped crossways about his torso, the rygtha crescent axe held loose in his left hand.

Dogs were howling, their voices awakened by the mourners, and on the flanks of the slopes to the south the rodara herds shifted this way and that, nervous and fretful.

Redmask had turned away, then. His copper-masked officers drew closer, along with Masarch and, trailing a few steps behind, Toc Anaster.

'We are done fleeing,' Redmask said. 'Today, we will spill yet more Letherii blood.'

This was what the Awl warriors had been waiting to hear. Their loyalty was not in question, not since Bast Fulmar, yet they were young and they had tasted blood. They wanted to taste it again. The elaborate hare-dance in which they had led the Letherii had gone on too long. Even the clever ambushes sprung on the enemy outriders and scouts had not been enough. The wending, chaotic march had seemed too much like flight.

The warriors were assembled north of the encampment with dawn still fresh in the air, the dog-masters and their helpers leashing the snapping, restless beasts and positioning their charges slightly to the east. Horses stamped on the dew-smeared ground, clan pennons wavering like tall reeds. Scouts were sent off with horse-archers to make contact with the Letherii outriders and drive them back to their nest. This would ensure that the specific presentation of Redmask's forces would remain unknown for as long as possible.

Moments before the army set out, Torrent arrived to position himself at Toc's side. The warrior was scowling, as he did most mornings – and afternoons and evenings – when he had forgotten to don his mask of paint. Since it had begun to give him a blotchy rash on cheeks, chin and forehead, he 'forgot' more often these days – and Toc answered that belligerent expression with a bright smile.

'Swords unsheathed this day, Torrent.'

'Has Redmask given you leave to ride to battle?'

Toc shrugged. 'He's said nothing either way, which I suppose is leave enough.'

'It is not.' Torrent backed his horse away, then swung it round to ride to where Redmask sat astride his Letherii mount beyond the rough line of readied riders.

Settling back in the strange boxy Awl saddle, Toc examined once again his bow, then the arrows in the quiver strapped to his right thigh. He wasn't much interested in actually fighting, but at the very least he would be ready to defend himself if necessary. *Ill omens.* Clearly Redmask was indifferent to such notions. Toc scratched at the lurid tissue surrounding his eyeless socket. *I miss that eye, gift of High Denul in what seems ages past. Gods knew, made me a real archer again – these days I'm damned near useless. Fast and inaccurate, that's Toc the Unlucky.*

Would Redmask forbid him his ride this day? Toc did not think so. He could see Torrent exchanging words with the war leader, the unmasked warrior's horse sidestepping and tossing its head. *True enough, how the beast comes to resemble its master. Imagine all the one-eyed dogs I might have owned.* Torrent then wheeled his mount and made his way back towards Toc at a quick canter.

The scowl had darkened. Toc smiled once more. 'Swords unsheathed this day, Torrent.'

'You've said that before.'

'I thought we might start over.'

'He wants you out of danger.'

'But I can still ride with the army.'

'I do not trust you, so do not think that anything you do will not be unwitnessed.'

'Too many nots there, I think, Torrent. But I'm feeling generous this morning so I'll leave the reins loose.'

'One must never knot his reins,' Torrent said. 'Any fool knows that.'

'As you say.'

The army set out, all mounted for the moment – including the dog-masters – but that would not last. Nor, Toc suspected, would the force remain united. Redmask saw no battle as a singular event. Rather, he saw a collection of clashes, an engagement of wills; where one was blunted he would shift his attention to resume the sparring elsewhere, and it was in the orchestration of these numerous meetings that a battle was won or lost. Flanking elements would spin off from the main column. More than one attack, more than one objective.

Toc understood this well enough. It was, he suspected, the essence of tactics among successful commanders the world over. Certainly the Malazans had fought that way, with great success. Eschewing the notion of feints, every engagement was deliberate and deliberately intended to lock an enemy down, into fierce, desperate combat.

*'Leave feints to the nobility,'* Kellanved had once said. *'And they can take their clever elegance to the barrow.'* That had been while he and Dassem Ultor had observed the Untan knights on the field of battle east of Jurda. Riding back and forth, back and forth. Tiring their burdened warhorses, sowing confusion in the dust-clouds engulfing their own ranks. Feint and blind. Dassem had ignored the pureblood fools, and before the day's battle was done he had shattered the entire Untan army, including those vaunted, once-feared knights.

The Letherii did not possess heavy cavalry. But if they did, Toc believed, they would play feint and blind all day long.

Or perhaps not. Their sorcery in battle was neither subtle nor elegant. Ugly as a Fenn's fist, in fact. This suggested a certain pragmatism, an interest in efficiency over pomp, and, indeed, a kind of impatience regarding the mannerisms of war.

Sorcery. Had Redmask forgotten the Letherii mages?

The vast level plain where the enemy waited – the Awl called it Pradegar, Old Salt – was not magically dead. Redmask's shamans had made use of the residual magic there to track the movements of the enemy army, after all.

*Redmask, have you lost your mind?*

The Awl rode on.

*More than swords unsheathed this day, I fear.* He scratched again at his gaping socket, then kicked his horse into motion.

Orbyn Truthfinder disliked the feel of soft ground beneath him. Earth, loam, sand, anything that seemed uneasy beneath his weight. He would suffer a ride in a carriage, since the wheels were solid enough, the side to side lurching above the rocky trail serving to reassure him whenever he thought of that uncertainty below. He stood now on firm stone, a bulge of scraped bedrock just up from the trail that wound the length of the valley floor.

The air's breath was sun-warmed, smelling of cold water and pine. Midges wandered in swarms along the streams of ice-melt threading down the mountainsides, slanting this way and that whenever a dragonfly darted into their midst. The sky was cloudless, the blue so sharp and clean compared to the dusty atmosphere of Drene – or any other city for that matter – that Orbyn found himself glancing upward again and again, struggling with something like disbelief.

When not looking skyward, the Patriotist's eyes were fixed on the three riders descending from the pass ahead. They had moved well in advance of his company, climbing the heights, then traversing the spine of the mountains to the far pass, where a garrison had been slaughtered. Where, more importantly, a certain shipment of weapons had not arrived. In the grander scheme, such a loss meant little, but Factor Letur Anict was not a man of grand schemes. His motivations were truncated, parsed into a language of precision, intolerant of deviation, almost neurotic when faced with anything messy. And this, indeed, was messy. In short, Letur Anict, for all his wealth and power, was a bureaucrat in the truest sense of the word.

The advance riders were returning, at long last, but Orbyn was not particularly pleased by that. They would have nothing good to say, he knew.

Tales of rotting corpses, charred wood, squalling ravens and mice among mouldering bones. At the very least, he could force himself once again into the Factor's carriage to sit opposite that obnoxious number-chewer, and counsel – with greater veracity this time – that they turn their column round and head back to Drene.

Not that he would succeed, he knew. For Letur Anict, every insult was grievous, and every failure was an insult. Someone would pay. Someone always did.

Some instinct made Orbyn glance back at the camp and he saw the Factor emerging from his carriage. Well, that was a relief, since Orbyn was in the habit of sweating profusely in Letur's cramped contrivance. He watched as the washed-out man picked a delicate path up to where stood Orbyn. Overdressed for the mild air, his lank, white hair covered by a broad-rimmed hat to keep the sun from pallid skin, his strangely round face already flushed with exertion.

'Truthfinder,' he said as soon as he reached the bulge of bedrock, 'we both know what our scouts will tell us.'

'Indeed, Factor.'

'So . . . where are they?'

Orbyn's thin brows rose, and he blinked to clear the sudden sweat stinging his eyes. 'As you know, they never descended farther than this – where we are camped right now. Leaving three possibilities. One, they turned round, back up and through the pass—'

'They were not seen to do that.'

'No. Two, they left the trail here and went south, perhaps seeking the Pearls Pass into south Bluerose.'

'Travelling the spine of the mountains? That seems unlikely, Truthfinder.'

'Three, they went north from here.'

The Factor licked his lips, as if considering something. Inflectionless, he asked, 'Why would they do that?'

Orbyn shrugged. 'One could, if one so desired, skirt the range until one reached the coast, then hire a craft to take one to virtually any coastal village or port of the Bluerose Sea.'

'Months.'

'Fear Sengar and his companions are well used to that, Factor. No fugitive party has ever fled for as long within the confines of the empire as have they.'

'Not through skill alone, Truthfinder. We both know that the Edur could have taken them a hundred times, in a hundred different places. And further, we both know why they have not done so. The question you and I have danced round for a long, long time is what, if anything, are we going to do regarding all of that.'

'That question, alas,' said Orbyn, 'is one that can only be addressed by our masters, back in Letheras.'

'Masters?' Letur Anict snorted. 'They have other, more pressing concerns. We must act independently, in keeping with the responsibilities granted us; indeed, in keeping with the very expectation that we will meet those responsibilities. Do we stand aside while Fear Sengar searches for the Edur god? Do we stand aside while Hannan Mosag and his so-called hunters work their deft incompetence in this so-called pursuit? Is there any doubt in your mind, Orbyn Truthfinder, that Hannan Mosag is committing treason? Against the Emperor? Against the empire?'

'Karos Invictad, and, I'm sure, the Chancellor, are dealing with the matter of the Warlock King's treason.'

'No doubt. Yet what might occur to their plans if Fear Sengar should succeed? What will happen to all of our plans, should the Edur God of Shadows rise again?'

'That, Factor, is highly unlikely.' *No, it is in fact impossible.*

'I am well acquainted,' Letur Anict said testily, 'with probabilities and risk assessment, Truthfinder.'

'What is it you desire?' Orbyn asked.

Letur Anict's smile was tight. He faced north. 'They are hiding. And we both know where.'

Orbyn was not happy. 'The extent of your knowledge surprises me, Factor.'

'You have underestimated me.'

'It seems I have at that.'

'Truthfinder. I have with me twenty of my finest guard. You have forty soldiers and two mages. We have enough lanterns to cast out darkness and so steal the power of those decrepit warlocks. How many remain in that hidden fastness? If we strike quickly, we can rid ourselves of this damnable cult and that alone is worth the effort. Capturing Fear Sengar in the bargain would sweeten the repast. Consider the delight, the accolades, should we deliver to Karos and the Chancellor the terrible traitor, Fear Sengar, and that fool, Udinaas. Consider, if you will, the *rewards*.'

Orbyn Truthfinder sighed, then he said, 'Very well.'

'Then you know the secret path. I suspected as much.'

*And you do not, and I knew as much.* He withdrew a handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his face, then along the wattle beneath his chin. 'The climb is strenuous. We shall have to leave the carriages and horses here.'

'Your three scouts can serve to guard the camp. They have earned a rest. When do we leave, Truthfinder?'

Orbyn grimaced. 'Immediately.'

Two of the three scouts were sitting beside a fire on which sat a soot-stained pot of simmering tea, while the third one rose, arched to ease his back, then sauntered towards the modest train that had spent most of the day descending into the valley.

The usual greetings were exchanged, along with invitations to share this night and this camp. The leader of the train walked wearily over to join the scout.

'Is that not the Drene Factor's seal on that carriage?' he asked.

The scout nodded. 'So it is.' His gaze strayed past the rather unimpressive man standing opposite him. 'You are not traders, I see. Yet, plenty of guards.'

'A wise investment, I should judge,' the man replied, nodding. 'The garrison fort gave proof enough of that. It stands abandoned still, half burnt down and strewn with the bones of slaughtered soldiers.'

The scout shrugged. 'The west side of the range is notorious for bandits. I heard they was hunted down and killed.'

'Is that so?'

'So I heard. And there's a new detachment on its way, along with carpenters, tree-fellers and a blacksmith. The fort should be rebuilt before season's end.' He shrugged. 'It's the risk of the road.'

Venitt Sathad nodded again. 'We passed no-one on the trail. Is the Factor coming to join you here, then?'

'He is.'

'Is it not unusual, this journey? Drene, after all, is on the far side of the sea.'

'Factor's business is his own,' the scout replied, a little tersely. 'You never answered me, sir.'

'I did not? What was your question again?'

'I asked what you were carrying, that needs so few packs and so many guards.'

'I am not at liberty to tell you, alas,' Venitt Sathad said, as he began scanning the camp. 'You had more soldiers here, not long ago.'

'Went down the valley yesterday.'

'To meet the Factor?'

'Just so. And I've had a thought – if they come up this night, the campsite here won't be big enough. Not for them and your group.'

'I expect you are correct.'

'Perhaps it'd be best, then, if you moved on. There's another site two thousand paces down the valley. You've enough light, I should think.'

Venitt Sathad smiled. 'We shall do as you have asked, then. Mayhap we will meet your Factor on the way.'

'Mayhap you will, sir.'

In the man's eyes, Venitt Sathad saw the lie. Still smiling, he walked back to his horse. 'Mount up,' he told his guards. 'We ride on.'

A most displeasing command, but Venitt Sathad had chosen his escort well. Within a very short time, the troop was once more on its way.

He had no idea why the man he was sent to meet was on this trail, so far from Drene. Nor did Venitt know where Anict had gone, since on all sides but ahead there was naught but rugged, wild mountains populated by little more than rock-climbing horned sheep and a few cliffnesting condors. Perhaps he would find out eventually. As it was, sooner or later Letur Anict would return to Drene, and he, Venitt Sathad, agent of Rautos Hivanar and the Letheras Liberty Consign, would be waiting for him.

With some questions from his master.

And some answers.

* * *

A shriek echoed in the distance, then faded. Closer to hand, amidst flickering lantern-light and wavering shadows, the last cries of the slaughtered had long since fallen away, as soldiers of Orbyn's guard walked among the piled bodies – mostly the young, women and the aged in this chamber – ensuring that none still breathed.

None did. Orbyn Truthfinder had made certain of that himself. In a distracted way, torn as he was by distaste and the necessity that no carelessness be permitted. They had been four bells in this subterranean maze, at the most, to mark the first breach of wards at the entranceway in the crevasse and all that followed, from room to room, corridor to corridor, the assault of light and refulgent sorcery.

Whatever elaborate organization of power had held fast in this buried demesne had been obliterated with scarce the loss of a single Letherii life, and all that then remained was simple butchery. Hunting down the ones who hid, who fled to the farthest reaches, the smallest storage rooms, the children huddling in alcoves and, for one, in an amphora half filled with wine.

Less than four bells, then, to annihilate the Cult of the Black-Winged Lord. These degenerate versions of Tiste Edur. Hardly worth the effort, as far as Orbyn Truthfinder was concerned. Even more bitter to the tongue, there had been no sign of Fear Sengar or any of his companions. No sign, indeed, that they had ever been here.

His gaze resting upon the heaped corpses, he felt sullied. Letur Anict had used him in his obsessive pursuit of efficiency, of cruel simplification of his world. One less nagging irritant for the Factor of Drene. And now they would return, and Orbyn wondered if this journey to track down a few wagonloads of cheap weapons had, in fact, been nothing more than a ruse. One that fooled him as easily as it would a wide-eyed child.

He drew out a cloth to wipe the blood from his dagger, then slipped the long-bladed weapon back into its sheath below his right arm.

One of his mages approached. 'Truthfinder.'

'Are we done here?'

'We are. We found the chamber of the altar. A half-dozen tottering priests and priestesses on their knees beseeching their god for deliverance.' The mage made a sour face. 'Alas, the Black-Winged Lord wasn't home.'

'What a surprise.'

'Yes, but there was one, sir. A surprise, that is.'

'Go on.'

'That altar, sir, it was truly sanctified.'

Orbyn glanced at the mage with narrowed eyes. 'Meaning?'

'Touched by Darkness, by the Hold itself.'

'I did not know such a Hold even existed. Darkness?'

'The Tiles possess an aspect of Darkness, sir, although only the oldest texts make note of that. Of the Fulcra, sir. The White Crow.'

Orbyn's breath suddenly caught. He stared hard at the mage standing before him, watched the shadows flit over the man's lined face. 'The White Crow. The strange Edur who accompanies Fear Sengar is so named.'

'If that stranger is so named, then he is not Tiste Edur, sir.'

'Then what?'

The mage gestured at the bodies lying on all sides. 'Tiste Andii, they call themselves. Children of Darkness. Sir, I know little of this . . . White Crow, who travels with Fear Sengar. If indeed they walk together, then something has changed.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Edur and the Andii, sir, were most vicious enemies. If what we have gleaned from Edur legends and the like holds any truth, then they warred, and that war ended with betrayal. With the slaying of the White Crow.' The mage shook his head. 'That is why I do not believe in this White Crow who is with Fear Sengar – it is but a name, a name given in error, or perhaps mockery. But if I am wrong, sir, then an old feud has been buried in a deep grave, and this could prove . . . worrisome.'

Orbyn looked away. 'We have slaughtered the last of these Andii, have we not?'

'In this place, yes. Should we be confident that they are the last Andii left? Even in Bluerose? Did not the Edur find kin across the ocean? Perhaps other contacts were made, ones our spies in the fleets did not detect. I am made uneasy, sir, by all of this.'

*You do not stand alone in that, mage.* 'Think more on it,' he said.

'I shall.'

As the mage turned to leave Orbyn reached out a huge, plump hand to stay him. 'Have you spoken with the Factor?'

A frown, as if the mage had taken offence at the question. 'Of course not, sir.'

'Good. Of the altar, and the sanctification, say nothing.' He thought for a moment, then added, 'Of your other thoughts, say nothing as well.'

'I would not have done otherwise, sir.'

'Excellent. Now, gather our soldiers. I would we leave here as soon as we can.'

'Yes sir, with pleasure.'

*Leave Letur Anict to his world made simpler. What he would have it to be and what it is, are not the same. And that, dear Factor, is the path to ruin. You will walk it without me.*

Clip stood facing south. His right hand was raised, the chain and its rings looped tight. He'd not spun it for more than a dozen heartbeats. His hair, left unbound, stirred in the wind. A few paces away, Silchas Ruin sat on a boulder, running a whetstone along the edge of one of his singing swords.

Snow drifted down from a pale blue sky, some high-altitude version of a sun-shower, perhaps, or winds had lifted the flakes from the young peaks that reared on all sides but directly ahead. The air was bitter, so dry that wool sparked and crackled. They had crossed the last of the broken plateau the day before, leaving behind the mass of shattered black stone that marked its cratered centre. The climb this morning had been treacherous, as so many slabs of stone under foot were sheathed in ice. Reaching the crest

of the caldera in late afternoon light, they found themselves looking upon a vast descending slope, stretching north for half a league or more to a tundra plain. Beyond that the horizon reached in a flat, hazy white line. Ice fields, Fear Sengar had said, to which Udinaas had laughed.

Seren Pedac paced restlessly along the ridge. She had been walking with the others, well behind Clip and Silchas Ruin. There was light left to continue, yet the young Tiste Andii had perched himself on the crest to stare back the way they had come. Silent, expressionless.

She walked over to stand before Udinaas, who had taken to carrying the Imass spear again and was now seated on a rock poking the spear's point into the mossy turf. 'What is happening here?' she asked him in a low voice. 'Do you know?'

'Familiar with the jarack bird, Acquitor? The grey-crested thief and murderer of the forest?'

She nodded.

'And what happens when a jarack female finds a nest containing some other's bird's hatchlings? An unguarded nest?'

'It kills and eats the chicks.'

He smiled. 'True. Commonly known. But jaracks do something else on occasion, earlier in the season. They push out an egg and leave one of their own. The other birds seem blind to the exchange. And when the jarack hatches, of course it kills and eats its rivals.'

'Then sounds its call,' she said. 'But it's a call that seems no different from those of the other bird's chicks. And those birds come with food in their beaks.'

'Only to be ambushed by the two adult jaracks waiting nearby and killed in the nest. Another meal for their hatchling.'

'Jaracks are in every way unpleasant birds. Why are we talking about jaracks, Udinaas?'

'No reason, really. But sometimes it's worth reminding ourselves that we humans are hardly unique in our cruelty.'

'The Fent believed that jaracks are the souls of abandoned children who died alone in the forest. And so they yearn for a home and a family, yet are so driven to rage when they find them they destroy all that they desire.'

'The Fent were in the habit of abandoning children?'

Seren Pedac grimaced. 'Only in the last hundred or so years.'

'Impediments to their self-destructive appetites, I should think.'

She said nothing to that comment, yet in her mind's eye she saw Hull Beddict suddenly standing beside her, drawing to his full height, reaching down to take Udinaas by the throat and dragging the man upright.

Udinaas suddenly bolted forward, choking, one hand clawing up towards her.

Seren Pedac stepped back. *No, dammit!* She struggled to cast the vision away.

It would not leave.

Eyes bulging, face blackening, Udinaas closed his own hands about his neck, but there was nothing to pull away—

'Seren!' Kettle shrieked.

*Errant fend! What, how . . . oh, I'm killing him!* Hull Beddict stood, crushing the life from Udinaas. She wanted to reach out to him, drag his grip loose, but she knew she would not be strong enough. No, she realized, she needed someone else—

And conjured into the scene within her mind another figure, stepping close, lithe and half seen. A hand flashing up, striking Hull Beddict in his own throat. The Letherii staggered back, then fell to one knee, even as he released Udinaas. Hull then reached for his sword.

A spear shaft scythed into view, caught Hull flat on the forehead, snapping his head back. He toppled.

The Edur warrior now stood between Hull Beddict and Udinaas, spear held in a guard position.

Seeing him, seeing his face, sent Seren reeling back. *Trull Sengar? Trull —*

The vision faded, was gone.

Coughing, gasping, Udinaas rolled onto his side.

Kettle rushed to crouch beside the ex-slave.

A hand closed on Seren's shoulder and swung her round. She found herself staring up into Fear's face, and wondered at the warrior's strange expression. *He – he could not have seen. That would be—*

'Shorn,' Fear whispered. 'Older. A sadness—' He broke off then, unable to go on, and twisted away.

She stared after him. *A sadness upon his eyes.*

*Upon his eyes.*

'Deadly games, Acquitor.'

She started, looked over to see that Silchas Ruin was now studying her from where he sat. Beyond him, Clip had not turned round, had not even moved. 'I did not. I mean. I didn't—'

'Imagination,' Udinaas grated from the ground to her right, 'is ever quick to judge.' He coughed again, then laughter broke from his ravaged throat. 'Ask any jealous man. Or woman. Next time I say something that annoys you, Seren Pedac, just swear at me, all right?'

'I'm sorry, Udinaas. I didn't think—'

'You thought all right, woman.'

*Oh, Udinaas.* 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'What sorcery have you found?' Fear Sengar demanded, his eyes slightly wild as he glared at her. 'I saw—'

'What did you see?' Silchas Ruin asked lightly, slipping one sword into its scabbard, then drawing the other.

Fear said nothing, and after a moment he pulled his gaze from Seren Pedac. 'What is Clip doing?' he demanded.

'Mourning, I expect.'

This answer brought Udinaas upright into a sitting position. Glancing at Seren, he nodded, mouthed *Jarack*.

'Mourning what?' Fear asked.

'All who dwelt within the Andara,' Silchas Ruin replied, 'are dead. Slaughtered by Letherii soldiers and mages. Clip is the Mortal Sword of Darkness. Had he been there, they would now still be alive – his kin. And the bodies lying motionless in the darkness would be Letherii. He wonders if he has not made a terrible mistake.'

'That thought,' the young Tiste Andii said, 'was fleeting. They were hunting for you, Fear Sengar. And you, Udinaas.' He turned, his face appalling in its calm repose. The chains spun out, snapped in the cold air, then whirled back inward again. 'My kin would have made certain there would remain no evidence that you were there. Nor were the Letherii mages powerful enough – nor clever enough – to desecrate the altar, although they tried.' He smiled. 'They brought their lanterns with them, you see.'

'The gate didn't stay there long enough anyway,' Udinaas said in a cracking voice.

Clip's hard eyes fixed on the ex-slave. 'You know nothing.'

'I know what's spinning from your finger, Clip. You showed us once before, after all.'

Silchas Ruin, finished with the second sword, now sheathed it and rose. 'Udinaas,' he said to Clip, 'is as much a mystery as the Acquitor here. Knowledge and power, the hand and the gauntlet. We should move on. Unless,' he paused, facing Clip, 'it is time.'

*Time? Time for what?*

'It is,' Udinaas said, using the Imass spear to get to his feet. 'They knew they were going to die. Hiding in that deep pit took them nowhere. Fewer young, ever weaker blood. But that blood, well, spill enough of it . . .'

Clip advanced on the ex-slave.

'No,' Silchas Ruin said.

The Mortal Sword stopped, seemed to hesitate, then shrugged and turned away. Chain spinning.

'Mother Dark,' Udinaas resumed with a tight smile. 'Open your damned gate, Clip, it's been paid for.'

And the spinning chain snapped taut. Horizontally. At each end a ring, balanced as if on end. Within the band closest to them there was . . . darkness.

Seren Pedac stared, as that sphere of black began growing, spilling out from the ring.

'She has this thing,' Udinaas muttered, 'about birth canals.'

Silchas Ruin walked into the Dark and vanished. A moment later there was a ghostly flit as Wither raced into the gate. Kettle took Udinaas's hand and led him through.

Seren glanced over at Fear. *We leave your world behind, Tiste Edur. And yet, I can see the realization awaken in your eyes. Beyond. Through that gate, Fear Sengar, waits the soul of Scabandari.*

He settled a hand on his sword, then strode forward.

As Seren Pedac followed, she looked at Clip, met his eyes as he stood there, waiting, the one hand raised, the gate forming a spiralling tunnel out from the nearest ring. In some other world, she imagined, the gate emerged from the other ring. *He's carried it with him. Our way through to where we needed to go. All this time.*

Clip winked.

Chilled by that gesture, the Acquitor stepped forward and plunged into darkness.

Third Maiden Isle was dead astern, rising into view on the swells then falling away again in the troughs. The ferry groaned like a floundering beast, twisting beneath its forest of masts and their makeshift sails, and the mass of Shake huddled sick and terrified on the deck. Witches and warlocks, on their knees, wailed their prayers to be heard above the gale's swollen fury, but the shore was far away now and they were lost.

Yedan Derryg, drenched by the spume that periodically thrashed over the low gunnels with what seemed demonic glee, was making his way towards Yan Tovis, who stood beside the four men on the steering oar. She was holding on to a pair of thick ratlines, legs set wide to take the pitch and yawl, and as she studied her half-brother's face as he drew nearer, she saw what she already knew to be truth.

*We're not going to make it.*

Cleaving the lines once past the salt marsh, then up, rounding the peninsula and out along the north edge of the reefs, a journey of three days and two nights before they could tie up in one of the small coves on the lee side of Third Maiden Isle. The weather had held, and at dawn this day all had seemed possible.

'The seams, Twilight,' Yedan Derryg said upon reaching her. 'These waves are hammering 'em wide open. We're going down—' He barked a savage laugh. 'Beyond the shore, be well as they say! More bones to the deep!'

He was pale – as pale as she no doubt was – yet in his eyes there was a dark fury. 'Tour's Spit lies two pegs off the line, and there're shoals, but, sister, it's the only dry land we might reach.'

'Oh, and how many on the deck there know how to swim? Any?' She shook her head, blinking salty spray from her eyes. 'What would you have us do, crash this damned thing onto the strand? Pray to the shore that we can slip through the shoals untouched? Dear Watch, would you curl up in the lap of the gods?'

Bearded jaw bunched, cabled muscles growing so tight she waited to hear bone or teeth crack, then he looked away. 'What would *you* have us do, then?'

'Get the damned fools to bail, Yedan. We get any lower and the next wave'll roll us right over.'

Yet she knew it was too late. Whatever grand schemes of survival for her people she had nurtured, deep in her heart, had come untethered. By this one storm. It had been madness, flinging this coast-creeping ferry out beyond the shore, even though the only truly dangerous stretch had been . . . *this one, here, north from Third Maiden Isle to the lee of Spyrock Island. The only stretch truly open to the western ocean.*

The gale lifted loose suddenly, slammed a fist into the port side of the craft. A mast splintered, the sail billowing round, sheets snapping, and like a huge wing the sail tore itself loose, carrying the mast with it. Rigging snatched up hapless figures from the deck and flung them skyward. A second mast toppled, this one heavy enough to tug its sail downward. Yet more tinny screams reaching through the howl.

The ferry seemed to slump, as if moments from plunging into the deep. Yan Tovis found herself gripping the lines as if they could pull her loose, into the sky – as if they could take her from all of this. *The Queen commands. Her people die.*

*At least I will join—*

A shout from Yedan Derryg, who had gone forward into the chaos of the deck, a shout that reached her.

And now she saw. Two enormous ships had come upon them from astern, one to each side, heaving like hunting behemoths, their sails alone dwarfing the ferry pitching in their midst. The one to port stole the gale's fierce breath and all at once the ferry righted itself amidst choppy waves.

Yan Tovis stared across, saw figures scrambling about side-mounted ballistae, saw others moving to the rail beneath huge coils of rope.

*Pirates? Now?*

The crew of the ship to starboard, she saw with growing alarm, was doing much the same.

Yet it was the ships that most frightened her. For she recognized them.

*Perish. What were they called? Yes, Thrones of War.* She well remembered that battle, the lash of sorceries ripping the crests of waves, the detonations as Edur galleys disintegrated before her very eyes. The cries of drowning warriors—

Ballistae loosed their robust quarrels, yet the missiles arced high, clearing the deck by two or more man-heights. And from them snaked out ropes. The launching had been virtually simultaneous from both ships. She saw those quarrels rip through the flimsy sails, slice past rigging, then the heavy-headed missiles dipped down to the seas in between.

She saw as the ropes were hauled taut. She felt the crunching bite of the quarrels as they lifted back clear of the water and anchored barbs deep into the gunnels of the ferry.

And, as the wind pushed them all onward now, the Thrones of War drew closer.

Massive fends of bundled seaweed swung down to cushion the contact of the hulls.

Sailors from the Perish ships scrambled along the lines, many of them standing upright as they did so – impossibly balanced despite the pitching seas – and dropped down onto the ferry deck with ropes and an assortment of tools.

The ropes were cleated to stanchions and pills on the ferry.

An armoured Perish emerged from the mass of humanity on the main deck and climbed her way to where stood Yan Tovis.

In the language of the trader's tongue, the woman said, 'Your craft is sinking, Captain. We must evacuate your passengers.'

Numbed, Yan Tovis nodded.

'We are sailing,' said the Perish, 'for Second Maiden Isle.'

'As were we,' Yan Tovis responded.

A sudden smile, as welcome to Yan Tovis's eyes as dawn after a long night. 'Then we are most well met.'

*Well met, yes. And well answered. Second Maiden Fort. The silent Isle has been conquered. Not just the Malazans then. The Perish. Oh, look what we have awakened.*

He'd had months to think things over, and in the end very little of what had happened back in the Malazan Empire surprised Banaschar, once Demidrek of the Worm of Autumn. Perhaps, if seen from the outside, from some borderland where real power was as ephemeral, as elusive, as a cloud on the face of the moon, there would be a sense of astonishment and, indeed, disbelief. That the mortal woman commanding the most powerful empire in the world could find herself so . . . helpless. So bound to the ambitions and lusts of the faceless players behind the tapestries. Folk blissfully unaware of the machinations of politics might well believe that someone like Empress Laseen was omnipotent, that she could do entirely as she pleased. And that a High Mage, such as Tayschrenn, was likewise free, unconstrained in his ambitions.

For people with such simplistic world views, Banaschar knew, catastrophes were disconnected things, isolated in and of themselves. There was no sense of cause and effect beyond the immediate, beyond the directly observable. A cliff collapses onto a village, killing hundreds. The effect: death. The cause: the cliff 's collapse. Of course, if one were to then speak of cutting down every tree within sight, including those above that cliff, as the true cause of the disaster – a cause that, in its essence, lay at the feet of the very victims, then fierce denial was the response; or, even more pathetic, blank confusion. And if one were to then elaborate on the economic pressures that demanded such rapacious deforestation, ranging from the need for firewood among the locals and the desire to clear land for pasture to increase herds all the way to the hunger for wood to meet the shipbuilding needs of a port city leagues distant, in order to go to war with a neighbouring kingdom over contested fishing areas – contested because the

shoals were vanishing, leading to the threat of starvation in both kingdoms, which in turn might destabilize the ruling families, thus raising the spectre of civil war . . . well, then, the entire notion of cause and effect, suddenly revealing its true level of complexity, simply overwhelmed.

Rebellion in Seven Cities, followed by terrible plague, and suddenly the heart of the Malazan Empire – Quon Tali – was faced with a shortage of grain. But no, Banaschar knew, one could go yet further back. Why did the rebellion occur at all? Never mind the convenient prophecies of apocalypse. The crisis was born in the aftermath of Laseen's coup, when virtually all of Kellanved's commanders vanished – drowned, as the grisly joke went. She sat herself down on the throne, only to find her most able governors and military leaders gone. And into the vacuum of their departure came far less capable and far less reliable people. She should not have been surprised at their avarice and corruption – for the chapter she had begun in the history of the empire had been announced with betrayal and blood. *Cast bitter seeds yield bitter fruit*, as the saying went.

Corruption and incompetence. These were rebellion's sparks. Born in the imperial palace in Unta, only to return with a vengeance.

Laseen had used the Claw to achieve her coup. In her arrogance she clearly imagined no-one could do the same; could infiltrate her deadly cadre of assassins. Yet, Banaschar now believed, that is what had happened. And so the most powerful mortal woman in the world had suddenly found herself emasculated, indeed trapped by a host of exigencies, unbearable pressures, inescapable demands. And her most deadly weapon of internal control had been irrevocably compromised.

There had been no civil war – the *Adjunct* had seen to that – yet the enfilade at Malaz City might well have driven the final spike into the labouring heart of Laseen's rule. The Claw had been decimated, perhaps so much so that *no-one* could use it for years to come.

The Claw had declared war on the wrong people. And so, at long last, Cotillion – who had once been Dancer – had his revenge on the organization that had destroyed his own Talon and then lifted Laseen onto the throne. For, that night in Malaz City, there had been a Shadow Dance.

Causes and effects, they were like the gossamer strands spanning the towers of Kartool City, a deadly web, a skein tethered to a thousand places. And to imagine that things were simple was to be naive, often fatally so.

A crime that he himself had been guilty of, Banaschar now understood. D'rek's rage against her worshippers had not been an isolated, internal event. It belonged to a vast war, and in war people died. Perhaps, unlike Banaschar, Tayschrenn had not been greatly affected by the tragedy. Perhaps, indeed, the Imperial High Mage had known all along.

Such unpleasant thoughts were in the habit of wandering into his mind when the sun had long fled the sky, when he should have been asleep – plummeted into the drunken stupor of oblivion here in the decrepit room he had rented opposite the Harridict Tavern on this damned island. Instead he stood by the window, wide awake, listening to the cold wind creak its way through the shutters. And even if it had been a warm night, he doubted he would have opened those shutters. Better to see nothing but those weathered slats; better to be reminded that there was no way out.

The Worm of Autumn stirred in his gut; an immortal parasite and he its mortal host. The goddess was within him once more, after all these years. Again, no surprise. *After all, I'm the only one left.* Yet D'rek remained as no more than a presence, a faint taste on his tongue. There had been no battle of wills; but he knew it would come. The goddess needed him and sooner or later she would reach out and close a cold fist about his soul.

This was no way to be called by one's god.

He heard skittering noises behind him and slowly closed his eyes.

'Smells. Smells, smells, smells.'

The words were a whining whisper in Banaschar's head.

'That's the problem, Telorast. With this island. With this entire continent! Oh, why did we come here? We should have stolen the bodies of two gulls, never mind these rotting stick-things with empty bellies we can't never fill! How many rats have we killed, Telorast? Answer me!'

'So we couldn't eat them,' muttered Telorast. 'Killing them was fun, wasn't it? Cleanest ships in the world. Enough of your complaining, Curdle. Can't you feel how close we are?'

'She's walked here!' Now there was terror in Curdle's voice. *'What are we doing in this place?'*

Banaschar turned. The two knee-high skeletal reptiles were pacing back and forth the length of the cot, clambering awkwardly amidst the dishevelled folds of bedding. 'A good question,' he said. 'What *are* you doing here? In my room? And who is "she"?'

Curdle's head bobbed, jaws clacking. 'Not-Not-Apsalar drove us away. But we need to tell someone!'

'Anyone!' chimed Telorast. 'Even you!'

'Her name is Lostara Yil,' Banaschar said. 'Not Not-Not- Apsalar – gods, did I just say that?'

' "She",' Curdle said, tail whipping, 'is the one who walked here. Long ago. More long ago than you could even think of, that long ago. Telorast is mad. She's excited, but how can anyone be excited when we're so close to *her*? Madness!'

'Just because she walked here,' Telorast said, 'doesn't mean she's still hanging around. Got no big skulls to push her fist through, not for a long time, right? And look at us, Curdle. We could dance in the palm of her hand. Either one. Or both, one for me and one for you – and she wouldn't be able to tell anything about us, not anything.' The creature swung to face Banaschar again. 'So there's no reason to panic, and that's what you need to tell Curdle, Wormfood. So, go on, tell her.'

Banaschar slowly blinked, then said, 'There's nothing to worry about, Curdle. Now, will you two leave? I have more brooding to do and half the night's gone.'

Telorast's razor-beaked head swung to Curdle. 'See? Everything's fine. We're close because we have to be. Because it's where Edgewalker wants—'

'Quiet!' Curdle hissed.

Telorast ducked. 'Oh. We have to kill him now, don't we?'

'No, that would be messy. We just have to hope for a terrible accident. Quick, Telorast, think of a terrible accident!'

'I've never heard of Edgewalker,' Banaschar said. 'Relax and go away and forget thinking about killing me. Unless you want to awaken D'rek, that is. The goddess might well know who this Edgewalker is, and from that might be able to glean something of your deadly secret mission, and from that she might decide it would be better if you two were crushed into dust.'

Curdle leapt down from the cot, crept closer to Banaschar, then began to grovel. 'We didn't mean anything by any of that. We never mean anything, do we, Telorast? We're most useless and tiny besides.'

'We can smell the Worm all right,' Telorast said, head bobbing. 'On you. In you. Just one more dread smell hereabouts. We don't like it at all. Let's go, Curdle. He's not the one we should be talking to. Not as dangerous as Not-Apsalar, but just as scary. Open those shutters, Wormfood; we'll go out that way.'

'Easy for you,' Banaschar muttered, turning back to pull the slatted barriers aside. The wind gusted in like Hood's own breath, and the reborn priest shivered.

In a flash the two reptiles were perched on the sill.

'Look, Telorast, pigeon poo.'

Then the two creatures leapt from sight. After a moment, Banaschar closed the shutters once more. Making right his vision of the world. His world, at least.

*'Shillydan the dark-eyed man*
*Pokes his head up for a look round*
*Hillyman the black-clawed man*
*Came up the well for a look round*

*"Well and* and*!" says the twelve-toed man*
*And round down the hill he bound*
*Still-me-hand the dead-smile man*
*Went bounding bound down he did bound*

*Shillydan the red-water man*
*Croaks and kisses the lass's brow*
*Hillyman the blue-cocked man—'*

'For Hood's sake, Crump, stop that damned singing!'

The gangly sapper straightened, stared with mouth agape, then ducked down once more and resumed digging the pit. Under his breath he began humming his mad, endless swamp song.

Corporal Shard watched the dirt flying out, caught by the whipping wind in wild swirls, for a moment longer. Twenty paces beyond the deep hole and Crump's flashing shovel squatted the low-walled stone enclosure where the squad had stashed their gear, and where now crouched Sergeant Cord, Masan Gilani, Limp and Ebron, taking shelter from the blustery wind. In a short while, Cord would call everyone to their feet, and the patrol of this part of the coast would begin.

In the meantime, Crump was digging a pit. A deep pit, just like the sergeant ordered. Just like the sergeant had been ordering every day for nearly a week now.

Shard rubbed at his numbed face, sick with worry over his sister. The Sinn he knew was gone and no sign of her remained. She'd found her power, creating something avid, almost lurid, in her dark eyes. He was frightened of her and he was not alone in that. Limp's bad knees knocked together whenever she came too close, and Ebron made what he thought were subtle, unseen gestures of warding behind her back. Masan Gilani seemed unaffected – that at least was something, maybe a woman thing at that, since Faradan Sort had been pretty much the same.

That simple? Terrifying to men but not women? But why would that be the case?

He had no answer for that.

Crump's humming was getting louder, drawing Shard's attention once again. Loud enough to very nearly overwhelm the distant groans of dying ice from the other side of the strait. Worth yelling at the fool again? Maybe not.

Dirt flying out, skirling skyward then racing out on the wave of the gelid wind.

There were holes dotted along half a league of this island's north coast. Crump was proud of his achievement, and would go on being proud, probably for ever. Finest holes ever dug. Ten, fifty, a hundred, however many the sergeant wanted, yes sir.

Shard believed that Cord's fervent hope that one such pit would collapse, burying the damned idiot once and for all, was little more than wishful thinking.

*After all, Crump digs great holes.*

He heard a piping shriek from some way behind him and turned. And there she was. Sinn, the girl he used to throw onto a shoulder like a sack of tubers – a giggling sack – and rush with through room after room as her laughter turned to squeals and her legs started kicking. Straggly black hair whipping about, a bone flute in her hands, its music flung out into the bitter tumult like inky strands, as she cavorted in the face of the weather as if spider-bitten.

Sinn, the child witch. The High Mage with a thirst for blood.

Child of the rebellion. Stolen from the life she should have lived, fashioned by horror into something new. Child of Seven Cities, of the Apocalyptic, oh yes. Dryjhna's blessed spawn.

He wondered how many such creatures were out there, stumbling through the ruins like starved dogs. Uprising, grand failure, then plague: how many scars could a young soul carry? Before it twisted into something unrecognizable, something barely human?

Did Sinn find salvation in sorcery? Shard held no faith that such salvation was in truth benign. A weapon for her will, and how far could a mortal go with such a weapon in their hands? How vast the weight of their will, unbound and unleashed?

They were right to fear. So very right.

A gruff command from Sergeant Cord and it was time to begin the patrol. A league's worth of blasted, wind-torn coastline. Crump climbed out of the pit and dusted his palms, his face shining as he looked down on his handiwork.

'Isn't she fine, Corporal? A hole dug by a High Marshal of Mott Wood, and we know how to dig 'em, don't we just. Why, I think it might be the best one yet! Especially with all the baby skulls on the bottom, like cobbles they are, though they break too easy – need to step light! Step light!'

Suddenly chilled in a place far deeper than any wind could reach, Shard walked to the edge of the pit and looked down. Moments later the rest of the squad joined him.

In the gloom almost a man's height down, the glimmer of rounded shapes. *Like cobbles they are.*

And they were *stirring*.

A hiss from Ebron and he glared across at Sinn, whose music and dancing had reached a frenzied pitch. 'Gods below! Sergeant—'

'Grab that shovel again,' Cord growled to Crump. 'Fill it in, you fool! Fill it in! Fill them all in!'

Crump blinked, then collected up his shovel and began pushing the dry soil back into the hole. 'Best hole-fillers t'be found anywhere! You'll see, Sergeant! Why, you won't never see holes filled so good as them's done by a High Marshal of Mott Wood!'

'Hurry up, you damned fool!'

'Yes sir, hurry up. Crump can do that!'

After a moment, the sapper began singing.

> '*Shillydan the red-water man*
> *Croaks and kisses the lass's brow*
> *Hillyman the blue-cocked man*
> *Strokes and blessings t'thank 'er now!*'

Nimander Golit, wrapped in a heavy dark blue woollen cloak, stood at one end of the winding street. Decrepit harbour buildings leaned and sagged, a brick grimace curling down to the waterfront that glittered a hundred paces distant. Shreds of cloud scudded beneath a night sky of bleary stars, rushing southward like advance runners of snow and ice.

Tiste Andii, sentinel to the dark; he would have liked such grand notions wrapped about him as tightly as this cloak. A mythic stance, heavy with . . . with something. And the sword at his side, a weapon of heroic will, which he could draw forth when dread fate arrived with its banshee wail, and use with a skill that could astound – like the great ones of old, a consummate icon of power unveiled in Mother Dark's name.

But it was all a dream. His skill with the sword was middling, a symbol of mediocrity as muddied as his own bloodline. He was no soldier of darkness, just a young man standing lost in a strange street, a man with nowhere to go – yet driven, driven on at this very moment – to go *somewhere*.

No, even that was untrue. He stood in the night because of a need to escape. Phaed's malice had become rabid, and Nimander was the one in whom she had chosen to confide. Would she murder Sandalath Drukorlat here in this port city, as she had vowed? More to the point, was he, Nimander, going to permit it? Did he even have the courage to betray Phaed – knowing how swiftly she would turn, and how deadly her venom?

*Anomander Rake would not hesitate. No, he would kick down the door to Phaed's room and drag the squealing little stoat out by her neck. And he'd then shake the life from her. He'd have no choice, would he? One look into Phaed's eyes and the secret would be revealed. The secret of the vast empty space within her, where her conscience should be. He would see it plain,*

*and then into her eyes would come the horror of exposure* – moments before her neck snapped.

Mother Dark would wait for Phaed's soul, then, for its shrieking delivery, the malign birth of just execution, of choices that were not choices at all. Why? *Because nothing else can be done. Not for one such as her.*

And Rake would accept the blood on his hands. He would accept that terrible burden as but one more amidst countless others he carried across a hundred thousand years. Childslayer. A child of one's own blood.

The courage of one with power. And that was Nimander's very own yawning emptiness in the heart of his soul. *We may be his children, his grandchildren, we may be of his blood, but we are each incomplete. Phaed and her wicked moral void. Nenanda and his unreasoning rage. Aranatha with her foolish hopes. Kedeviss who screams herself awake every morning. Skintick for whom all of existence is a joke. Desra who would spread her legs for any man if it could boost her up one more rung on the ladder towards whatever great glory she imagines she deserves. And Nimander, who imagines himself the leader of this fell family of would-be heroes, who will seek out the ends of the earth in his hunt for . . . for courage, for conviction, for a reason to do, to feel* anything.

Oh, for Nimander, then, an empty street in the dead of night. With the denizens lost in their fitful, pathetic sleep – as if oblivion offered any escape, any escape at all. For Nimander, these interminable moments in which he could contemplate actually making a decision, actually stepping between an innocent elder Tiste Andii and Nimander's own murderous little sister. To say *No, Phaed. You will not have this. No more. You shall be a secret no longer. You shall be known.*

If he could do that. If he could but do that.

He heard a sound. Spinning, the whisper of fine chain cutting a path through the air – close, so close that Nimander spun round – but there was no-one. He was alone. *Spinning, twirling, a hiss* – then a sudden snap, two distinct, soft clicks as of two tiny objects held out at each end of that fine chain – *yes, this sound, the prophecy – Mother fend, is this the prophecy?*

Silence now, yet the air felt febrile on all sides, and his breath was coming in harsh gasps. *'He carries the gates, Nimander, so it is said. Is this not a worthy cause? For us? To search the realms, to find, not our grandsire, but the one who carries the gates?*

*'Our way home. To Mother Dark, to her deepest embrace – oh, Nimander, my love, let us—'*

'Stop it,' he croaked. 'Please. Stop.'

She was dead. On the Floating Isle. Cut down by a Tiste Edur who'd thought nothing of it. Nothing. She was dead.

And she had been his courage. And now there was nothing left.

The prophecy? Not for one such as Nimander.

*Dream naught of glory. She too is dead.*

*She was everything. And she is dead.*

A cool wind sighed, plucking away that tension – a tension he now knew he but imagined. A moment of weakness. Something skittering on a nearby roof.

These things did not come to those who were incomplete. He should have known better.

Three soft chimes sounded in the night, announcing yet another shift of personnel out in the advance pickets.

Mostly silent, soldiers rose, dark shapes edging out from their positions, quickly replaced by those who had come to guard in their stead. Weapons rustled, clasps and buckles clicked, leather armour making small animal sounds. Figures moved back and forth on the plain. Somewhere in the darkness beyond, on the other side of that rise, out in the sweeps of high grasses and in the distant ravines, the enemy hid.

The soldiers knew that Bivatt had believed the battle was imminent. Redmask and his Awl were fast approaching. Blood would be spilled in the late afternoon on the day now gone. Oh, as the Letherii soldiers along the

advance pickets well knew, the savages had indeed arrived. And the Atri-Preda had arrayed her mages to greet them. Foul sorceries had crackled and spat, blackening whole swaths of grassland until ash thickened the air.

Yet the enemy would not close, the damned Awl would not even show their faces. Even as they moved, just beyond line of sight, to encircle the Letherii army. This sounded deadlier than it was – no Awl line of barbarians would be able to hold against a concerted break-out, and the hundreds of low-ranking tactical geniuses common to all armies had predicted again and again that Bivatt would do just that: drive a solid wedge into contact with the Awl, scattering them to the winds.

Those predictions began falling away as the afternoon waned, as dusk gathered, as night closed in round them with its impenetrable cloak.

*Well*, they then said, *of course she ain't bitten. It's an obvious trap, so clumsy it almost beggars belief. Redmask wants us out of our positions, moving this way and that. Wants the confusion, d'you see? Bivatt's too smart for that.*

So now they sat the night, tired, nervous, and heard in every sound the stealthy approach of killers in the dark. Yes, friends, there was movement out there, no doubt of that. So what were the bastards doing?

*They're waiting. To draw swords with the dawn, like they did the last time. We're sitting out here, wide awake, for nothing. And come the morrow we'll be sand-eyed and stiff as corpses, at least until the fighting starts for real, then we'll tear their hides off. Blade and magic, friends. To announce the day to come.*

The Atri-Preda paced. Brohl Handar could see her well enough, although even if he couldn't he would be able to track her by the mutter of her armour. And, despite the diminishment of details, the Tiste Edur knew she was overwrought; knew she held none of the necessary calm expected of a commander; and so it was well, he concluded, that the two of them were twenty or more paces away from the nearest bivouac of troops.

More than a little exposed, in fact. If the enemy had infiltrated the pickets, they might be hiding not ten paces distant, adjusting grips on their knives

moments before the sudden rush straight for them. Slaying the two leaders of this invading army. Of course, to have managed that, the savages would have had to deceive the magical wards woven by the mages, and that seemed unlikely. Bivatt was not unique when it came to fraught nerves, and he needed to be mindful of such flaws.

Redmask excelled in surprises. He had already proved that, and it had been foolish to expect a sudden change, a dramatic failure in his deviousness. Yet was this simply a matter of seeking battle with the sun's rise? That seemed too easy.

The Atri-Preda walked over. 'Overseer,' she said in a low voice, 'I would you send your Edur out. I need to know what he's doing.'

Startled, Brohl said nothing for a moment.

She interpreted that, rightly, as disapproval. 'Your kind are better able to see in the dark. Is that not correct? Certainly better than us Letherii; but more important, better than the Awl.'

'And their dogs, Atri-Preda? They will smell us, hear us – they will raise their heads and awaken the night. Like your soldiers,' he continued, 'mine are in position, facing the high grasses and expecting to sight the enemy at any moment.'

She sighed. 'Yes, of course.'

'He plays with us,' Brohl Handar said. 'He wants us second-guessing him. He wants our minds numbed with exhaustion come the dawn, and so slowed in our capacity to react, to respond with alacrity. Redmask wants us confused, and he has succeeded.'

'Do you imagine that I don't know all that?' she demanded in a hiss.

'Atri-Preda, you do not even trust your mages just now – the wards they have set to guard us this night. Our soldiers should be sleeping.'

'If I have reason to lack confidence in my mages,' Bivatt said dryly, 'I have good cause. Nor has your K'risnan impressed me thus far, Overseer. Although,' she added, 'his healing talents have proved more than adequate.'

'You sound very nearly resentful of that,' Brohl said.

She waved a dismissive hand and turned away to resume her pacing.

A troubled commander indeed.

Redmask would be delighted.

Toc leaned along the length of the horse's neck. He was riding bareback, and he could feel the animal's heat and its acrid yet gentle smell filled his nostrils as he let the beast take another step forward. From the height of the horse's shoulder he could see just above the line of the ridge off to his left.

The modest defensive berms were like humped graves along the flat this side of the Letherii camp. There had been a change of guard – the chimes had been readily audible – meaning yet another ideal time for the attack had slipped past.

He was no military genius, but Toc believed that this night could not have been more perfect as far as the Awl were concerned. They had their enemy confused, weary and frayed. Instead, Redmask exhausted his own warriors by sending them one way and then the next, with the seemingly sole purpose of raising dust no-one could even see. No command to initiate contact had been issued. No concerted gathering to launch a sudden strike into the Letherii camp. Not even any harassing flights of arrows to speed down in the dark.

He thought he understood the reason for Redmask's inconstancy. The Letherii mages. His scouts had witnessed that impatient, deadly sorcery, held ready to greet the Awl attack. They had brought back stories of blistered land, rocks snapping in the incandescent heat, and these tales had spread quickly, driving deep into the army a spike of fear. The problem was simple. Here, in this place, Redmask had no answer to that magic. And Toc now believed that Redmask would soon sound the retreat, no matter how galling – no spilling of blood, and the great advantage of advancing well beyond reach of the Letherii column and so avoiding detection had been surrendered, uselessly thrown away. No battle, yet a defeat nonetheless.

His horse, unguided by the human on its back, took another step, head dipping so that the animal could crop grass. Too much of that and the beast would find its bowels in knots.

*Oh, we take you into slaughter without a moment's thought. And yes, some of you come to enjoy it, to lust for that cacophony, that violence, the reek of blood. And so we share with you, dear horse, our peculiar madness. But who judges us for this crime against you and your kind? No-one.*

*Unless you horses have a god.*

He wondered if there might be a poem somewhere in that. *But poems that remind us of our ghastlier traits are never popular, are they? Best the bald lies of heroes and great deeds. The slick comfort of someone else's courage and conviction. So we can bask in the righteous glow and so feel uplifted in kind.*

*Aye, I'll stay with the lies. Why not? Everyone else does.*

*And those who don't are told they think too much. Hah, now there's a fearsome attack enough to quail any venturesome soul. See me tremble.*

His horse heard a whinny from off to the right and in whatever language the beasts shared that sound was surely a summons, for it lifted its head, then walked slowly towards it. Toc waited a few moments longer, then, when he judged they were well clear of the ridge line behind them, he straightened and gathered the reins.

And saw before him a solid line of mounted warriors, lances upright.

In front of the row was the young Renfayar, Masarch.

Toc angled his horse on an approach.

'What is this, Masarch? A cavalry charge in the dark?'

The young warrior shrugged. 'We've readied three times this night, Mezla.'

Toc smiled to himself. He'd thrown that pejorative out in a fit of self-mockery a few days past, and now it had become an honorific. Which, he

admitted, appealed to his sense of irony. He edged his horse closer and in a low tone asked: 'Do you have any idea what Redmask is doing, Masarch?'

A hooded glance, then another shrug.

'Well,' Toc persisted, 'is this the main concentration of forces? No? Then where?'

'To the northwest, I think.'

'Is yours to be a feint attack?'

'Should the horn sound, Mezla, we ride to blood.'

Toc twisted on the horse and looked back at the ridge. The Letherii would feel the drumming of hoofs, and then see the silhouettes as the Awl crested the line. And those soldiers had dug pits – he could already hear the snapping of leg bones and the animal screaming. 'Masarch,' he said, 'you can't charge those pickets.'

'We can see them well enough to ride around them—'

'Until the animal beside you jostles yours into one.'

At first Toc thought he was hearing wolves howling, but the sudden cry levelled out – Redmask's rodara horn.

Masarch raised his lance. 'Do you ride with us, Mezla?'

*Bareback?* 'No.'

'Then ride fast to one side!'

Toc kicked his horse into motion, and as he rode down the line he saw the Awl warriors ready their weapons above suddenly restless mounts. Breaths gusted like smoke into the air. From somewhere on the far side of the Letherii encampment there was the sudden reverberation of clashing arms.

He judged that Masarch led six or seven hundred Awl riders. Urging his horse into a gallop, Toc drew clear just as the mass of warriors surged forward. 'This is madness!' He spun the mount round, tugging his bow loose from his shoulder even as he looped the reins over his left wrist. Jamming

one end of the bow onto his moccasined foot – between the big toe and the rest – he leaned down his weight to string it. Weapon readied and in his right hand, he deftly adjusted his hold on the reins and knotted them to ensure that they did not fall and foul the horse's front legs.

As the beast cantered into the dusty wake of the cavalry charge, Toc Anaster drew out from the quiver at his hip the first stone-tipped arrow. *What in Hood's name am I doing?*

*Getting ready to cover the retreat I know is coming? Aye, a one-eyed archer . . .*

With the pressure of his thighs and a slight shifting of weight, he guided his horse in the direction of the rise – where the Awl warriors had arrived in a dark mass, only now voicing their war-cries. Somewhere in the distance rose the sound of dogs, joining that ever-growing cacophony of iron on iron and screaming voices.

Redmask had finally struck, and now there was chaos in the night.

The cavalry, reaching the rise, swept down the other side and moments later were lost from sight.

Toc urged his horse forward, nocking the arrow. He had no stirrups to stand in while shooting, making this whole exercise seem ridiculous, yet he quickly approached the crest. Moments before arriving, he heard the clash ahead – the shouts, the piercing shrieks of injured horses, and beneath it all the thunder of hoofs.

Although difficult to discern amidst the darkness and dust, Toc could see that most of the lancers had swept round the outlying pickets, continuing on to crash into the camp itself. He saw soldiers emerging from those entrenchments, many wounded, some simply dazed. Younger Awl warriors rode among them, slashing down with scimitars in a grotesque slaughter.

Coruscating light burgeoned off to the right – the foaming rise of sorcery – and Toc saw the Awl cavalry begin to withdraw, pulling away like fangs from flesh.

'No!' he shouted, riding hard now towards them. 'Stay among the enemy! Go back! Attack, you damned fools! Attack!'

But, even could they hear him, they had seen the magic, the tumult building into a writhing wave of blistering power. And fear took their hearts. Fear took them and they fled—

Still Toc rode forward, now among the berms. Bodies sprawled, horses lying on their sides, kicking, ears flat and teeth bared; others broken heaps filling pits.

The first of the retreating Awl raced past, unseeing, their faces masks of terror.

A second wave of sorcery had appeared, this one from the left, and he watched it roll into the first of the horsewarriors on that side. Flesh burst, fluids sprayed. The magic climbed, slowed as it seemed to struggle against all the flesh it contacted. Screams, the sound reaching Toc on its own wave, chilling his very bones. Hundreds died before the magic spent itself, and into the dust now swirled white ash – all that was left of human and horse along the entire west flank.

Riders swarming past Toc, along with riderless horses surging ahead in the grip of panic. Dust biting his lone eye, dust seeking to claw down his throat, and all around him shadows writhing in their own war of light and dark as sorceries lifted, rolled then fell in gusting clouds of ash.

And then Toc Anaster was alone, arrow still nocked, in the wasteland just inside the berms. Watching another wave of sorcery sweep past his position, pursuing the fleeing Awl.

Before he could think either way, Toc found himself riding hard, in behind that dread wave, into the scalding, brittle air of the magic's wake – and there, sixty paces away, within a mass of advancing soldiers, he saw the mage. The latter clenched his hands and power tumbled from him, forming yet another excoriating conjuration of raw destruction that rose up to greet Toc, then heaved for him.

One eye or not, he could see that damned wizard.

An impossible shot, jostled as he was on the horse's back as the beast weaved between pits and suspect tufts of grass, as its head lifted in sudden recognition of terrible danger.

Silver-veined power surging towards him.

Galloping now, mad as any other fool this night, and he saw, off to his left, a deep, elongated trench – drainage for the camp's latrines – and he forced his mount towards it, even as the sorcery raced for him on a convergent path from his right.

The horse saw the trench, gauged its width, then stretched out a moment before gathering to make the leap.

He felt the beast lift beneath him, sail through the air – and for that one moment all was still, all was smooth, and in that one moment Toc twisted at the hips, knees hard against the animal's shoulders, drew the bow back, aimed – damning this flat, one-eyed world that was all he had left – then loosed the stone-tipped arrow.

The horse landed, throwing Toc forward onto its neck. Bow in his right hand, legs stretching out now along the length of the beast's back, and his left arm wrapping, desperately tight, about the animal's muscle-sheathed neck – behind them and to the right, the heat of that wave, reaching out, closer, closer—

The horse screamed, bolting forward. He held on.

And felt a gust of cool air behind him. Risked a glance.

The magic had died. Beyond it, at the front line of the advancing – now halted and milling – Letherii troops, a body settling onto its knees. A body without a head; a neck from which rose, not blood, but something like smoke—

A detonation? Had there been a detonation – a thumping crack, bludgeoning the air – yes, maybe he had heard—

He regained control of his horse, took the knotted reins in his left hand and guided the frightened creature round, back towards the crest.

The air reeked of cooked meat. Other flashes lit the night. Dogs snarled. Soldiers and warriors died. And among Masarch's cavalry, Toc would later learn, half were not there to see the dawn.

High overhead, night and its audience of unblinking stars had seen enough, and the sky paled, as if washed of all blood, as if drained of the last life.

The sun was unkind in lighting the morning sky, revealing the thick, biting ash of incinerated humans, horses and dogs. Revealing, as well, the strewn carnage of the battle just done. Brohl Handar walked, half numbed, along the east edge of the now-dishevelled encampment, and approached the Atri-Preda and her retinue.

She had dismounted, and was now crouched beside a corpse just inside the berms – where, it seemed, the suicidal Awl had elected to charge. He wondered how many had died to Letherii sorcery here. Probably every damned one of them. Hundreds for certain, perhaps thousands – there was no way to tell in this kind of aftermath, was there? A handful of fine ash to mark an entire human. Two for a horse. Half for a dog. Just so. The wind took it all away, less than an orator's echo, less than a mourner's gut-deep grunt of despair.

He staggered to a halt opposite Bivatt, the corpse – headless, it turned out – between them.

She looked up, and perhaps it was the harsh sunlight, or the dust in a thin sheath – but her face was paler than he had ever seen before.

Brohl studied the headless body. One of the mages.

'Do you know, Overseer,' Bivatt asked in a rough voice, 'what could have done this?'

He shook his head. 'Perhaps his sorcery returned to him, uncontrolled—'

'No,' she cut in. 'It was an arrow. From a lone archer with the audacity to outrun . . . to slip between – Overseer, an archer riding bareback, loosing his arrow whilst his horse leapt a trench . . .'

She stared up at him, disbelieving, as if challenging him to do other than shake his head. He was too tired for this. He had lost warriors last night. Dogs rushing from the high grasses. Dogs . . . and two Kechra – two, there were only two, weren't there? The same two he had seen before. Only one with those strapped-on swords.

Swords that had chopped his K'risnan in half, one swinging in from one side, the other from the opposite side. Not that the blades actually met. The left one had been higher, from the top of the shoulder down to just below the ribcage. The right blade had cut into ribs, down through the gut, tearing free below the hip and taking a lot of that hip out with it. So, to be accurate, not in half. In three.

The other Kechra had just used its talons and jaws, proving no less deadly – in fact, Brohl thought this one more savage than its larger companion, more clearly delighting in its violent mayhem. The other fought with perfunctory grace. The smaller, swordless Kechra revelled in the guts and limbs it flung in every direction.

But those beasts were not immortal. They could bleed. Take wounds. And enough spears and swords had managed to cut through their tough hides to drive both of them off.

Brohl Handar blinked down at the Atri-Preda. 'A fine shot, then.'

Rage twisted her features. 'He was bound with another of my mages, both drawing their powers together. They were exhausted . . . all the wards.' She spat. 'The other one, Overseer, his head burst apart too. Same as this one here. I've lost two mages, to one damned arrow.' She clambered stiffly to her feet. 'Who was that archer? *Who?* ' Brohl said nothing.

'Get your K'risnan to—'

'I cannot. He is dead.'

That silenced her. For a moment. 'Overseer, we mauled them. Do you understand? Thousands died, to only a few hundred of our own.'

'I lost eighty-two Tiste Edur warriors.'

He was pleased at her flinch, at the faltering of her hard gaze. 'An arrow. A lone rider. Not an Awl – the eyewitnesses swear to that. A mage-killer.'

*The only thorn from this wild ride through the night. I see, yes. But I cannot help you.* Brohl Handar turned away. Ten, fifteen strides across cracked, crackling, ash-laden ground.

Sorcery had taken the grasses. Sorcery had taken the soil and its very life. The sun, its glory stolen before it could rise this day, looked down, one-eyed. Affronted by this rival.

*Yes. Affronted.*

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When I go in search
The world cries out
And spins away
To walk is to reach
But the world turns
Shied into sublime fend
Flinching to my sting
So innocent a touch
This is what it is to search
The world's answer
Is a cornered retort
It does not want seeing
Does not suffer knowing
To want is to fail
And die mute
Ever solitary these steps
Yielding what it is
To be alone
Crying out to the world
Spinning away
As in its search
It finds you out.

*Search*
Gaullag of the Spring

He might well speak of mystery and show a mask of delighted wonder, but the truth of it was, mystery frightened Beak. He could smell sorcery, yes, and sense its poetic music, so orderly and eloquent, but its heat could so easily burn, right down to a mortal man's core. He was not much for bravery; oh, he could see it well enough among other soldiers – he could

see it in every detail of Captain Faradan Sort, who now sat her horse at his side – but he knew he possessed none of it himself.

Coward and stupid were two words that went together, Beak believed, and both belonged to him. Smelling magic had been a way of avoiding it, of running from it, and as for all those candles within him, well, he was happiest when nothing arrived that might send their flames flickering, brightening, bursting into a conflagration. He supposed it was just another stupid decision, this being a soldier, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Marching across that desert in that place called Seven Cities (although he'd only seen two cities, he was sure there were five more somewhere), Beak had listened to all the other soldiers complaining. About . . . well, everything. The fighting. Not fighting. The heat of the day, the cold at night, the damned coyotes yipping in the dark sounding so close you thought they were standing right beside you, mouth at your ear. The biting insects, the scorpions and spiders and snakes all wanting to kill you. Yes, they'd found lots to complain about. That terrible city, Y'Ghatan, and the goddess who'd opened one eye that night and so stolen away that evil rebel, Leoman. And then, when all had seemed lost, that girl – Sinn – showing her own candle. Blindingly bright, so pure that Beak had cowered before it. They'd complained about all of that, too. Sinn should have snuffed that firestorm out. The Adjunct should have waited a few days longer, because there was no way those marines would have died so easily.

And what about Beak? Hadn't he sensed them? Well, maybe. That mage, Bottle, the one with all the pets. Maybe Beak had smelled him, still alive under all those ashes. But then he was a coward, wasn't he? To go up to, say, the Adjunct, or Captain Kindly, and tell them – no, that was too much. Kindly was like his own father, who didn't like to listen whenever it was something he wasn't interested in hearing. And the Adjunct, well, even her own soldiers weren't sure of her.

He'd listened with all the rest to her speech after they'd left Malaz City (a most terrifying night, that, and he was so glad he'd been far away from it, out on a transport), and he remembered how she talked about going it alone

from now on. And doing things nobody else would ever know about. *Unwitnessed*, she said. As if that was important. Such talk usually confused Beak, but not this time. His entire life was, he knew, *unwitnessed*. So, she had made all the other soldiers just like him, just like Beak, and that had been an unexpected gift from that cold, cold woman. Coward or no and stupid as he was, she'd won him that night. Something she wouldn't think much of, obviously, but it meant a lot to him.

Anyway, his heart had slowed its wild run, and he lifted his head and glanced over at the captain. She sat her horse in the deep shadow, unmoving just as he had been, and yet, in an instant, he thought he caught from her a sound – the hammering of waves against stone, the screams of soldiers in battle, swords and slaughter, lances like ice piercing hot flesh, and the waves – and then all of that was gone.

She must have sensed his attention, for she asked in a low voice: 'Are they well past, Beak?'

'Aye.'

'Caught no scent of us?'

'None, Captain. I hid us with grey and blue. It was easy. That mage she kneels in front of the Holds. She knows nothing about the grey and blue warrens.'

'The Letherii were supposed to join us,' Faradan Sort muttered. 'Instead, we find them riding with Tiste Edur, doing their work for them.'

'All stirred up, aye. Especially round here.'

'And that's the problem,' she replied, gathering her reins and nudging her mount out from beneath the heavy branches where they had hidden – fifteen paces off the trail – while the war-party rode past. 'We're well ahead of the other squads. Either Hellian or Urb has lost their mind, or maybe both of them.'

Beak followed on his own horse, a gentle bay he'd named Lily. 'Like a hot poker, Captain, pushing right to the back of the forge. Do that and you burn your hand, right?'

'The hand, yes. Keneb. You and me. All the other squads.'

'Um, your hand, I meant.'

'I am learning to tell those moments,' she said, now eyeing him.

'What moments?' Beak asked.

'When you've convinced yourself how stupid you are.'

'Oh.' *Those moments*. 'I ain't never been so loyal, Captain. Never.'

She gave him a strange look then, but said nothing.

They rode up onto the trail and faced their mounts east. 'They're up there somewhere ahead,' the captain said. 'Causing all sorts of trouble.'

Beak nodded. They'd been tracking those two squads for two nights now. And it was truly a trail of corpses. Sprung ambushes, dead Letherii and Tiste Edur, the bodies dragged off into cover, stripped down and so naked Beak had to avert his eyes, lest evil thoughts sneak into his mind. All the places his mother liked him to touch that one night – no, all that was evil thinking, evil memories, the kind of evil that could make him hang himself as his brother had done.

'We have to find them, Beak.'

He nodded again.

'We have to rein them in. Tonight, do you think?'

'It's the one named Balgrid, Captain. And the other named Bowl – who's learned magic real fast. Balgrid's got the white candle, you see, and this land ain't had no white candle for a long time. So he's dragging the smell off all the bodies they're leaving and that's muddying things up – those ears they're cutting off, and the fingers and stuff that they're tying to their belts. That's why we're going from ambush to ambush, right? Instead of straight to them.'

'Well,' she said after a moment and another long, curious look, 'we're on damned horses, aren't we?'

'So are *they* now, Captain.'

'Are you sure?'

'I think so. Just tonight. It's the Holds. There's one for beasts. And if the Letherii mages figure things out, they could turn with that and find them real fast.'

'Hood's breath, Beak. And what about us?'

'Us too. Of course, there's plenty of people riding horses round here, bad stirrups or no. But if they get close, then maybe even grey and blue candles won't work.'

'You might end up having to show a few more, then.'

Oh, he didn't like that idea. 'I hope not. I really hope not.'

'Let's get going then, Beak.'

*Don't burn me down to the core, Captain. Please. It won't be nice, not for anyone. I can still hear their screams and there's always screams and I start first. My screams scare me the most, Captain. Scare me stupid, aye.*

'Wish Masan Gilani was with us,' Scant said, pulling up clumps of moss to wash the blood from his hands.

Hellian blinked at the fool. Masan who?

'Listen, Sergeant,' Balgrid said again.

He was always saying that and so she'd stopped listening to him. It was like pissing in the fire, the way men could do when women couldn't. Just a hiss into sudden darkness and then that awful smell. *Listen, Sergeant* and hiss, she stopped listening.

'You've got to,' Balgrid insisted, reaching out to prod her with a finger. 'Sergeant?'

She glared down at that finger. 'Want me t'cut off my left cheek, soldier? Touch me again and you'll be sorry 's what I'm sayin'.'

'Someone's tracking us.'

She scowled. 'For how long?'

'Two, maybe three nights going,' Balgrid replied.

'So you decide to tell me *now*? All my soljers are idiots. How they trackin' us? You and Bowl said you had it covered, had something covered, anyway. What was it you had covered? Right, you been pissing all over our trail or something.' She glared at him. 'Hiss.'

'What? No. Listen, Sergeant—'

And there it went again. She rose to her feet, wobbling on the soft, loamy ground. Where one could fall at every damned step if one wasn't careful. 'Someone – you, Corporal, drag them bodies away.'

'Aye Sergeant.

'Right away, Sergeant.'

'And you two. Maybe. Louts—'

'Lutes.'

'Help the corporal. You all made a mess killing these ones.' And that was right enough, wasn't it? This one had been nasty. Sixteen Letherii and four Edur. Quarrels to the heads did for them Edur what it does for normal people. Like sacks of stones on a big drop, whoo, toppling right off them horses. Then a pair of sharpers, one front of the Letherii column, the other at the tail end. Boom boom and the dusk was nothing but screaming and thrashing limbs human and horse and some couldn't tell which.

Damned Letherii had recovered a little too fast for her liking. Dead sure too fast for Hanno's liking, since Hanno went down with only half a skull left after one of the meanest sword swings she'd ever seen. Threw the soldier right off balance, though, with those stupid stirrups, and so it'd been easy for Urb to reach up one of those giant hands of his, grasp a belt or something and drag the fool right off. Throwing him down with such force that all wind rushed out of him both ends. At which point Urb pushed a mailed fist so hard into the face under the helmet that Urb hurt his knuckles on the back of the man's skull – low, just above the vertables or whatever

they were called. Teeth and bone splinters and meat spurting out everywhere.

The first loss in the squads, that'd been. All because Hanno jumped in close thinking the Letherii were still confused and useless. But no, these soldiers, they'd been veterans. They'd come round damned quick.

Saltlick was bad cut up, though Balgrid had worked on him and he wasn't bleeding out and unconscious any more. And Corporal Reem went and got two fingers of his left hand cut off – a bad fend with his shield. Poor Urb wasn't doing too well as sergeant.

Hellian worked round carefully until she faced another direction, and could see Urb sitting on a rotting log, looking miserable. She drank down a mouthful of rum then ambled over. 'We're both sergeants now, right? Let's go find some bushes t'crawl under. I'm in the mood for sweat and grunts with somebody, and since we're the same rank an' all it's only obvious and ain't nobody here gonna c'mplain.'

He blinked up at her, wide-eyed as an owl.

'Wha's your probbem, Urb? I ain't as ugly as you, am I?'

'Urb ain't ugly,' Reem said with an incredulous laugh. 'Masan couldn't think straight around him! Probably why she let herself get shifted over to Balm's squad.'

Hellian grunted, then said, 'Be quiet, Reem. You're a corporal. This is sergeant business.'

'You want a roll with Urb, Sergeant,' Reem said. 'Got nothing to do with you two being sergeants and everything t'do with Urb looking like some goddamned god and you drunk enough to get hungry for the sweats and grunts.'

'Still ain't your business.'

'Maybe not, but we gotta listen to those grunts. Like Scant said, if Masan was around we could all of us dream those dreams and maybe even try,

hoping she'd be so frustrated trying to get anywhere with Urb she just might —'

'Since when you find that runaway mouth of yours, Reem?' Balgrid demanded. 'You was better being silent and mysterious. So now you lose a couple fingers and what happens?'

'Quiet allaya,' Hellian said. 'You want another patrol coming down on us and us not ready for 'em this time? Now, the rest of you, not countin' Urb here, check your gear and get your trophies and all that and if you wanna listen then just don't make too many groanin' noises. Of envy and the like.'

'We won't be groaning outa envy, Hellian. More like—'

'Silent and mysterious, damn you, Reem!'

'I feel like talking, Balgrid, and you can't stop me—'

'But I can, and you won't like it at all.'

'Damned necromancer.'

'Just the other side of Denul, Reem, like I keep telling you. Denul's giving, Hood's taking away.'

Hellian closed in on Urb, who suddenly looked terrified. 'Relax,' she said. 'I ain't gonna cut anything off. Not anything of yours, anyway. But if I get clobbered with terrible rejection here . . .'

'Nice bed of moss over here,' Scant said, straightening and moving away with a gesture in his wake.

Hellian reached down and tugged Urb to his feet.

Balgrid was suddenly beside him. 'Listen, Sergeant—'

She dragged Urb past the mage.

'No, Sergeant! Those ones tracking us – I think they've found us!'

All at once weapons were drawn, figures scattering to defensive positions – a rough circle facing outward with Hellian and Urb in the centre.

'Balgrid,' she hissed. 'You coulda said—'

Horse hoofs, the heavy breath of an animal, then a voice called out, low, in Malazan: 'Captain Faradan Sort and Beak. We're coming in so put your damned sharpers away.'

'Oh, that's just great,' Hellian sighed. 'Ease down, everyone, it's that scary captain.'

* * *

Marines all right. Beak didn't like the look of them. Mean, hungry, scowling now that the captain had found them. And there was a dead one, too.

Faradan Sort guided her horse into their midst, then dismounted.

Beak remained where he was for the moment, not far from where two soldiers stood, only now sheathing their swords. He could see the necromancer, the man's aura white and ghostly. Death was everywhere here, the still air heavy with last breaths, and he could feel this assault of loss like a tight fist in his chest.

It was always this way where people died. He should never have become a soldier.

'Hellian, Urb, we need to talk. In private.' Cool and hard, the captain's voice. 'Beak?'

'Captain?'

'Join us.'

Oh no. But he rode forward and then slipped down from the saddle. Too much attention on him all at once, and he ducked as he made his way to the captain's side.

Faradan Sort in the lead, the group set off into the wood.

'We ain't done nothin' wrong,' Sergeant Hellian said as soon as they halted twenty or so paces from the others. She seemed to be weaving back and forth like a flat-headed snake moments from spitting venom.

'You were supposed to pace yourselves, not get too far ahead of the other squads. At any moment now, Sergeant, we won't be running onto patrols of twenty, but two hundred. Then two thousand.'

'Tha's not the probbem,' Hellian said – an accent Beak had never heard before. 'The probbem is, Cap'in, the Letherii are fightin' alongside them Edur—'

'Have you attempted to make contact with those Letherii?'

'We have,' Urb said. 'It got messy.' He shook his head. 'There's no sign, Captain, that these people want to be liberated.'

'Like Urb said,' Hellian added, nodding vigorously.

The captain looked away. 'The other squads have said much the same.'

'Maybe we can convince them or something,' Urb said.

Hellian leaned against a tree. 'Seems t'me, Cap'in, we got two things we can do and ony two. We can retreat back t'the coast. Build ten thousand rafts and paddle away 's fast as we can. Or we go on. Fast, vicious mean. And iffin they come at us two thousand at once, then we run an' hide like we was trained t'do. Fast and vicious mean, Cap'in, or a long paddle.'

'There is only one thing worse than arguing with a drunk,' Faradan Sort said, 'and that's arguing with a drunk who's right.'

Hellian beamed a big smile.

She was drunk? She was drunk. A drunk sergeant, only, as the captain had just said, no fool either.

Faradan Sort continued, 'Do you have enough horses for your squads?'

'Aye, sir,' Urb replied. 'More than enough.'

'I still want you to slow down, for a few days at least. I intend to contact the other squads and get them to start doing what you're doing, but that will take some time—'

'Captain,' Urb said. 'I got a feeling they're learning already. There's lots more patrols now and they're getting bigger and a lot more wary. We've been expecting to walk into an ambush at any time, and that's what's got us worried. Next time you ride to find us you might find a pile of corpses. Malazan corpses. We ain't got the munitions to carry us all the way – no-one has – so it's going to start getting a lot harder, sir.'

'I know, Sergeant. You lost one in that fight, didn't you?'

'Hanno.'

'Got careless,' Hellian said.

Urb frowned, then nodded. 'Aye, that's true.'

'Then let us hope that one hard lesson is enough,' the captain said.

'Expect it is,' Urb confirmed.

Faradan Sort faced Beak. 'Tell them about the Holds, Beak.'

He flinched, then sighed and said, 'Letherii mages – they might be able to find us by the horses, by smelling them out, I mean.'

'Balgrid's covering our trail,' Urb said. 'Are you saying it won't work?'

'Might be,' Beak said. 'Necromancy's one thing they can't figure. Not Letherii. Not Tiste Edur. But there's a Beast Hold, you see.'

Hellian withdrew a flask and drank down a mouthful, then said, 'We need to know for certain. Next time, Urb, we get us one of them Letherii mages alive. We ask some questions, and in between the screams we get answers.'

Beak shivered. Not just drunk but bloodthirsty, too.

'Be careful,' the captain said. 'That could go sour very quickly.'

'We know all about careful, sir,' Hellian said with a bleary smile.

Faradan Sort studied the sergeant the way she sometimes studied Beak himself, then she said, 'We're done. Slow down some, and watch out for small patrols – they might be bait.' She hesitated, then added, 'We're in this, now. Understand?'

'No rafts?'

'No rafts, Hellian.'

'Good. If'n I never see another sea I'm going to die happy.'

She would, too, Beak knew. Die happy. She had that going for her.

'Back to your squads,' the captain said. 'Set your nervous soldiers at ease.'

'It's not the smell,' Beak said.

The others turned inquiringly.

'That's not what's making them nervous, I mean,' Beak explained. 'The death smell – they're carrying all that with them, right? So they're used to it now. They're only nervous because they've been sitting around too long. In one place. That's all.'

'Then let us not waste any more time,' Faradan Sort said.

Good idea. That was why she was a captain, of course. Smart enough to make her ways of thinking a mystery to him – but that was one mystery he was happy enough with. Maybe the only one.

They flung themselves down at the forest's edge. Edge, aye – too many damned edges. Beyond was a patchwork of farmland and hedgerows. Two small farms were visible, although no lantern- or candle-light showed through the tiny, shuttered windows. Heart pounding painfully in his chest, Fiddler rolled onto his side to see how many had made it. A chorus of harsh breaths from the scatter of bodies in the gloom to either side of the sergeant. All there. Thanks to Corabb and the desert warrior's impossible luck.

The ambush had been a clever one, he admitted. Should have taken them all down. Instead, half a league back, in a small grassy glade, there was the carcass of a deer – a deer that Corabb had inadvertently flushed out – with about twenty arrows in it. Cleverly planned, poorly executed.

The Malazans had quickly turned it. Sharpers cracking in the night, crossbows thudding, the flit of quarrels and the punch of impact. Shrieks of agony. A rush from Gesler's heavies had broken one side of the ambush—

And then the sorcery had churned awake, something raw and terrible, devouring trees like acid. Grey tongues of chaotic fire, heaving into a kind of standing wave. Charging forward, engulfing Sands – his scream had been mercifully short. Fiddler, not ten paces away from where Sands had vanished, saw the Letherii mage, who seemed to be screaming with his own pain, even as the wave hurled forward. Bellowing, he'd swung his crossbow round, felt the kick in his hands as he loosed the heavy quarrel.

The cusser had struck a bole just above and behind the mage's head. The explosion flattened nearby trees, shredded a score of Letherii soldiers. Snuffed the sorcery out in an instant. As more trees toppled, branches thrashing down, the Malazans had pulled back, fast, and then they ran.

Movement from Fiddler's left and a moment later Gesler dragged himself up alongside. 'Hood's damned us all, Fid. We're running out of forest – how's Cuttle?'

'Arrow's deep,' Fiddler replied, 'but not a bleeder. We can dig it out when we get a chance.'

'Think they're tracking us?'

Fiddler shook his head. He had no idea. If there were enough of them left. He twisted round. 'Bottle,' he hissed, 'over here.'

The young mage crawled close.

'Can you reach back?' Fiddler asked. 'Find out if they're after us?'

'Already did, Sergeant. Used every damned creature in our wake.'

'And?' Gesler wanted to know.

'That cusser did most of them, Sergeant. But the noise brought others. At least a dozen Tiste Edur and maybe a few hundred Letherii. Are they tracking us now? Aye, but still a way behind – they've learned to be cautious, I guess.'

'We're losing the dark,' Gesler said. 'We need a place to hide, Fid – only that's probably not going to work this time, is it? They're not going to rest.'

'Can we lose them?' Fiddler asked Bottle.

'I'm pretty tired, Sergeant—'

'Never mind. You've done enough. What do you think, Gesler? Time to get messy?'

'And use up our few cussers?'

'Don't see much choice, to be honest. Of course, I always hold one back. Same for Cuttle.'

Gesler nodded. 'We had ours distributed – good thing, too, the way Sands went up. Still, he had munitions on him, yet they didn't ignite—'

'Oh, but they did,' Fiddler said. 'Just not in this realm. Am I right, Bottle? That sorcery, it's like a broken gate, the kind that chews up whoever goes through it.'

'Spirits below, Fid, you smelled it out about dead right. That magic, it started as one thing, then became another – and the mage was losing control, even before you minced him.'

Fiddler nodded. He'd seen as much. Or thought he had. 'So, Bottle, what does that mean?'

The young mage shook his head. 'Things are getting out of hand . . . somewhere. There was old stuff, primitive magic, at first. Not as ancient as spirit-bound stuff. Still, primitive. And then something chaotic grabbed it by the throat . . .'

A short distance away, Koryk rolled onto his back. He was bone tired. Let Bottle and the sergeants mutter away, he knew they were neck-deep in Hood's dusty shit.

'Hey, Koryk.'

'What is it, Smiles?'

'You damned near lost it back there, you know.'

'I did, did I?'

'When them four came at you all at once, oh, you danced quite a jig, half-blood.' She laughed, low and brimming with what sounded like malice. 'And if I hadn't come along to stick a knife in that one's eye – the one who'd slipped under your guard and was ready to give you a wide belly smile – well, you'd be cooling fast back there right now.'

'And the other three?' Koryk asked, grinning in the gloom. 'Bet you never knew I was that quick, did you?'

'Something tells me you didn't either.'

He said nothing, because she was right. He'd been in something like a frenzy, yet his eye and his hand had been cold, precise. Through it all it had been as if he had simply watched, every move, every block, every shift in stance and twist, every slash of his heavy blade. Watched, yes, yet profoundly in love with that moment, with each moment. He'd felt some of this at the shield wall on the dock that night in Malaz City. But what had begun as vague euphoria was now transformed into pure revelation. *I like killing. Gods below, I do like it, and the more I like it, the better at it I get.* He never felt more alive, never more perfectly *alive*.

'Can't wait to see you dance again,' Smiles murmured.

Koryk blinked in the gloom, then shifted to face her. Was she stirred? Had he somehow kissed her awake between those muscled legs of hers? Because he'd killed well? *Did I dance* that *jig, Smiles?* 'You get scarier, woman, the more I know you.'

She snorted. 'As it should be, half-blood.'

Tarr spoke from Koryk's other side: 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

A slightly more distant laugh from Cuttle, 'Aye, Tarr, it's what happens when your entire world view collapses. Of course,' he added, 'if you could manage to dance like poetry when killing people, who knows—'

'Enough of that. Please.'

'No worries,' Cuttle persisted. 'You ain't the dancing kind. You're as rooted as a tree, and just about as slow, Tarr.'

'I may be slow, Cuttle, but the fools go down eventually, don't they?'

'Oh aye, that they do. Not suggesting otherwise. You're a one-man shield-wall, you are.'

Corporal Stormy was spitting blood. A damned elbow had cracked his mouth, and now two teeth were loose and he'd bitten his tongue. The elbow might have been his own – someone had collided hard with him in the scrap and he'd had his weapon arm lifted high with the sword's point angled downward. Nearly wrenched his shoulder out of its damned socket.

A savage back-swing with the pommel had crunched the attacker's temple and he'd reeled away, one eye half popped out. Shortnose had then cut the Letherii down.

That had been some charge, him and his heavies, Shortnose and the trio of dread ladies each one of whom could both stare down a rutting bhederin bull and beat it into a pulp if it came to that. Making Stormy a very happy sergeant. Bad luck about Sands, though. *But we ain't gonna lose any more. Not one. I got my heavies and we can take down whatever they throw at us.*

*And not just us neither. That Tarr and Koryk . . . Fid's got a good mean pair in those. And that Smiles, she's got the blackrock heart of a Claw. Good squads here, for this kinda work. And now we're gonna turn round and kick 'em dead in the jaw, I can feel it. Fid and Gesler, cooking in Kellanved's old cauldron.*

He was delighted the Adjunct had finally cut them loose. In just this way, too. To Hood with damned marching in column. No, cut in fast and low and keep going, aye, and keep their heads spinnin' every which way. So the fools on their trail were coming for them, were they? And why not? Just two puny squads. And them probably in the hundreds by now.

'Kellanved's curse,' he muttered with a grin.

Flashwit's round face loomed into view, 'Say something, Corporal?'

'Malazan marines, my dear, that's us.'

'Not heavies? I thought—'

'You're both, Flash. Relax. It's this, you see – the Malazan marines haven't done what they was trained to do in years, not since before Kellanved died. Trained, y'see. To do exactly what we're doing right now, praise Fener. Them poor bastards Letherii and Edur, gods below, them poor ignorant fools.'

'Smart enough to ambush us,' Uru Hela said from beyond Flashwit.

'Didn't work though, did it?'

'Only because—'

'Enough from you, Uru Hela. I was talking here, right? Your corporal. So just listen.'

'I was just askin'—'

'Another word and you're on report, soldier.'

> If she snorted she fast turned it into a cough.
> From Gesler up with Fiddler: '*Quiet down there!* '
> Point proved. Stormy nodded.
> *Malazan marines. Hah.*

Fiddler nodded at the narrow, wending track snaking towards the nearest farmhouse and its meagre outbuildings. 'We jog good and heavy, dragging our wounded, down there. Straight for the farmhouse along that cart path.'

'Like we was still running scared, panicked,' Gesler said. 'Aye. Of course, we got to clear that farmhouse, which means killing civilians, and I have to say, Fid, I don't like that.'

'Maybe we can figure a way round that,' Fiddler replied. 'Bottle?'

'Aye, Sergeant. I'm tired, but I could probably glamour them. Maybe even throw some false ideas in their heads. Like, we went north when we really went south. Like that.'

'Don't ever die on us, Bottle,' Gesler said. To Fiddler, he added, 'I'll go collect munitions from my squad, then.'

'Me and Cuttle,' Fiddler said, nodding again.

'Trip wires?'

'No, it'll be daylight by then. No, we'll do the drum.'

'Hood take me,' Gesler breathed. 'You sure? I mean, I've heard about it—'

'You heard because me and Hedge invented it. And perfected it, more or less.'

'More or less?'

Fiddler shrugged. 'It either works or it doesn't. We've got Bottle's deception, in case it doesn't—'

'But there'll be no coming back to retrieve those cussers, though, will there?'

'Not unless you want to see the bright white light, Gesler.'

'Well,' the amber-hued man said with a grin, 'since there's a chance at seeing the legend come real, with the genius who invented it right here . . . I ain't gonna talk you out of it, Fid.'

'Half the genius, Gesler. Hedge was the other.'

'Second thoughts?'

'Second, ninth and tenth, friend. But we're doing it anyway. When everyone's ready, you lead them ahead, excepting me and Cuttle. To that farmhouse – the near one. I think the far one's abandoned. Could be the owner rebuilt. The fields look damned well kept, don't they?'

'Yeah, especially given how small the homestead is.'

'Let Bottle sniff it out before you go charging in.'

'Aye. You hear that, mage?'

'What? Sorry, I think I fell asleep.'

Gesler glared across at Fiddler. 'Our lives are in this man's hands? Hood help us.'

Orders were given, passed down the ragged row of supine soldiers. Dawn was just tingeing the air when Gesler, Bottle at his side and trailed by Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, led his now oversized squad onto the cart path. Scuffing the ground, dragging furrows here and there – not too obvious, just enough – as they made their way towards the modest farmhouse.

Fiddler and Cuttle watched them for a time, until they were well enough away from the place they'd decided was best for the trap. Shrubs running close to the cart path, narrowing lines of sight for that span. Beyond the bushes, two middle-aged trees on the left and one old ancient on the right.

Four cussers for this. Two close together, then one, and then the last.

Cuttle, his face sheathed in sweat from the arrow-head lodged in his shoulder, was strangely lacking in commentary as Fiddler directed the sapper to pace the track from this side of the narrowing to twenty strides beyond it, and set sticks in the ground when Fiddler so commanded. Once this was done, Cuttle's task was to dig holes in the packed earth where the sticks had been. Shallow holes.

A sapper who trusted to Oponn's pull might have left it at that, praying to the fickle Twins that a horse hoof would descend on at least one of the planted cussers. But that was not how the drum worked. All that was needed was vibration. If the cussers were thinned on one side just right; if the sharp stone against that spot was sharp enough and angled just right so that the reverberation would drive its tip into the clay shell. The real challenge, Fiddler and Hedge had discovered, was down to shaving the cusser – right down to eggshell thin – without breaking it and so painting leaves in the highest trees with one's own blood and guts.

As soon as Cuttle finished the first scooped-out hole, Fiddler headed towards it with a cusser cradled in his hands. Setting it down carefully on the ground, he drew a knife and made some minute adjustments to the hole. Then he turned his attention to the cusser. This one, furthest down along the track, would be the one to go first. Which would trigger the others, in the midst of the troop, with two at the back end in case the column was especially long.

He set the cusser into the hole, then settled down onto his stomach and brought his knife close to one side of the mine. And began scraping clay.

The sun had risen, and although the air was still cool sweat streamed down Fiddler's face as he shaved away minute slivers of the fine-grained clay. He wished for direct sunlight on the cusser, the side he was working on, so he could work until he saw that faint glow reaching through to the bright yellow incendiary powder with its shards of iron. But no such luck. All remained in shadow.

Finally, one last scrape, then he carefully edged the blade away. Found the sharp stone and set it down beside the thinned shell. Point against the clay, he made a half-twist – breath held, eyes squeezed shut – then slowly withdrew his hand. Opened his eyes. Studied his handiwork.

A few more deep breaths to settle his nerves, then he began filling the hole with small handfuls of earth. Then scattered detritus over the spot.

Fiddler belly-crawled away, until he reached the edge of the track where he'd left the other cussers. Glancing up the path, he saw Cuttle waiting at the far end, arms wrapped about his torso, looking like he'd just pissed himself. *Aye, he knows why we're a dying breed.*

Taking the second cusser, Fiddler made his way – lightly – to the second hole. Not as thin this time, but thin enough. Each one in turn slightly easier, which made shaving each of them increasingly dangerous – the risk of getting careless, sloppy, just in that wash of relief at having managed the first one . . . well, he knew all the dangers in all this, didn't he?

Teeth gritted, he arrived at the second hole in the path, slowly sank to his knees. Set the cusser down, and reached for his knife.

Cuttle was as close to pissing himself as he had ever been.

Not at the prospect of dying – he was fine enough with that and had been ever since finding himself in the Fourteenth – but at what he was witnessing here.

The last great Malazan sapper. No-one else came close. Imagine, shaving cusser shells. With a knife. Eggshell thin. Cuttle had watched, unable to

make out much from this distance, as Fiddler had set to work on the first one, the deadliest one of all. And he had prayed, to every god he could think of, to gods he didn't even know the names of, to spirits and ghosts and every sapper living or dead, each name a benediction to one man's brilliance. Praying that the one man he truly worshipped wouldn't . . . wouldn't what?

*Let me down.*

How pathetic. He knew that. He kept telling himself that, in between the breathed-out beseechings. As if he'd have time to rue the failing of his faith.

So there was Fiddler, closer now, at the second hole, doing it all over again. Imagine, Fid and Hedge, the way they must have been together. Gods, those Bridgeburners must have been holy terrors. But now . . . just Fiddler, and Cuttle here poorer than a shadow of the famous Hedge. It was all coming to an end. But so long as Fiddler stayed alive, well then, damn them all, it was worth holding on. And this arrow lodged in his left shoulder, well, true he'd seen it coming, but he hadn't exactly leaned into it, had he? Might have looked that way. Might have at that. As if he'd had time to even think, with everything going on around him. He wasn't superhuman, was he?

Edging back from the second set mine, Fiddler glanced over at Cuttle. The man's face was white as death. Well, thinking on it, he didn't need the man that close any more, did he?

He hand-signalled *Leave, rejoin the squads*.

Cuttle shook his head.

Shrugging – this was no time to argue and if Cuttle had a death-wish it wasn't news to Fiddler – he rose and set off to collect the third cusser. Even footfalls were now risky, forcing him to move slowly along the verge of the track. There was plenty of superstition about where to stash munitions when working. Hedge would have insisted the cussers be ahead of the work at all times, but the less Fiddler handled them the better he felt. No matter what, there was back and forth with the damned things, wasn't there?

He reached the spot and looked down at the two remaining cussers. More superstition. Which one? Heart side or head side? Facing the hole or with the hole behind him as it was now? Hood's breath, Hedge was clambering around in his skull like a fiend. Enough of the superstition! Fiddler crouched and collected a cusser.

Heart side.

And was random chance really any more than just that? The Moranth were fanatics when it came to precision. Every class of munitions perfect beyond belief. No variation at all. With variation, being a sapper would be nothing more than being a rock-thrower – with explosive rocks, mind, but even so. No real talent involved, no hard-earned skill.

Fiddler remembered, with the appalling clarity of a god-touched revelation, his first encounter with Moranth munitions. Northern Genabackis, a week before the march on the city of Mott followed by the twin nightmares of Mott Wood and Blackdog Swamp. There had been rumours of contact and extensive negotiations with a strange people ruling a place called Cloud Forest, far to the south. An isolated people, said to be terrifying and inhuman in appearance, who rode enormous domesticated four-winged insects – giant dragonflies – and could rain death upon enemies from great heights.

The Malazan negotiators had included Tayschrenn, some noble-born dignitary named Aragan, and a lone T'lan Imass named Onos T'oolan. The Second and Third Armies had been encamped on Nathii farmland two days from the landing south of Malyntaeas. A crate had been carried – gingerly, by sweating soldiers from the quartermaster's unit – and set down ten paces from the squad's hearth fire. Whiskeyjack had gestured Hedge and Fiddler over.

'You two do most of the sapping in this miserable squad,' the sergeant had said, grimacing as if he'd swallowed something unpleasant – which he had, by virtue of legitimizing Fid and Hedge's destructive anarchy. 'In yon box there are grenados and nastier stuff, come from the Moranth now that we're allied with 'em. Seems to make sense – in an insane way – to hand 'em over to you two. Now, obviously, you need to do some experimenting with

what's in that box. Just make sure you do it half a league or more from this here camp.' He hesitated, scratched at his bearded jaw, then added, 'The big ones are too big to throw far enough, far enough to survive them exploding, I mean. So you'll need to crack your heads together to work out trying them. As a final order, soldiers, don't kill yourselves. This squad's under strength as it is and I'd need to pick out two others to hump these damned things around. And the only two I could use are Kalam and Trotts.'

Aye, Trotts.

Fiddler and Hedge had pried the lid loose, then had stared down, bemused, at the well-packed grenados, nestled in frames and matted straw. Small round ones, long tapered ones, spike-shaped ones of exquisite glass – not a bubble to be seen – and, at the bottom, much larger ones, big enough to ride a catapult cup if one was so inclined (and, it turned out, suicidal, since they tended to detonate as soon as the catapult arm struck the brace. Great for destroying catapults and their hapless crews, though).

Experimentation indeed. Hedge and Fid had set out, the crate between them, on a long, exhausting walk into some out-of-the-way place, where they threw the small ones they decided to call sharpers because when detonated too close they had a tendency to pepper the thrower with slivers of iron and made the ears bleed; where they discovered the incendiary properties of the burners, to the wailing protestations of a farmer who'd witnessed the fiery destruction of a hay wagon (at least until they'd handed over four gold imperial sceptres – Kellanved's newly minted currency – which was enough money to buy a new farm). Crackers, driven into elongated wedge-shaped holes in hard-packed earth, did sweet mayhem on foundation stones, mortared or otherwise. And, finally, the cussers, the ugliest, nastiest munitions ever created. They were intended to be dropped from high overhead by the Moranth on their Quorls, and Hedge and Fid had used up most of their allotted supply trying to work out an alternative means of practical, non-fatal use. And, in the end, had needed twenty more – two crates' worth – to finally conclude that a fool would have to be Oponn-kissed by the Lady to try anything but secondary usage; add-ons to crackers and burners and, if the chance presented itself, a well-thrown sharper.

The oversized crossbows came much later, as did maniacal variations like the drum and the slow burn. And through all of that, the Lady's Pull always remained as the last resort. Had Fiddler been a religious man, he would have been obliged, he well knew, to drop every single coin of pay and loot he earned into the coffers of the Lady's temples, given how many times he had loosed a cusser at targets well within blast range of himself and countless other Malazans. Hedge had been even less . . . restrained. And, alas, his demise had therefore been of a nature succinctly unsurprising.

Reminiscing had a way of arriving at the worst of moments, a glamour of nostalgia no doubt infused with subtle but alluring suicidal inclinations, and Fiddler was forced to push all such remembrances aside as he approached Cuttle and the last hole in the path.

'You should have hightailed it out of here,' Fiddler said as he settled down beside the modest excavation.

'No chance of that,' Cuttle replied in a low voice.

'As you like, then, but don't be standing there at Hood's Gate if I mess this one up.'

'I hear you, Fid.'

And, trying not to think of Hedge, of Whiskeyjack, Trotts and all the rest; trying not to think of the old days, when the world still seemed new and wondrous, when taking mad risks was all part of the game, Fiddler, the last great saboteur, went to work.

Bottle squinted at the farmhouse. Someone or ones inside there, he was sure enough of that. Living, breathing folk, oh yes. But . . . something, a faint odour, charnel recollections, or . . . whatever. He wasn't sure, couldn't be sure, and that made him seriously uneasy.

Gesler had moved up beside him, had lain there patient as a tick on a blade of grass, at least to start. But now, a hundred or more heartbeats on, Bottle could sense the man growing restless. Fine enough for him, with that gold skin that didn't burn once in Y'Ghatan – of course, Truth had shown that the strange skin wasn't truly impervious, especially when it came to

Moranth munitions. Even so, Gesler was a man who had walked through fire, in every permutation of the phrase Bottle could think of, so all of this skulking and trickery and brutal slaughter was fine for him.

*But I'm the one they're all counting on, and I couldn't use this stupid sword at my belt to hack my way clear of a gaggle of puritanical do-gooders with their pointing fingers and sharp nails and all – gods below, where did that image come from? Damned Mockra, someone's leaking thoughts.* Bottle glanced over at Gesler. 'Sergeant?' he whispered.

'What?'

'Got strange notions in your skull, by any chance?'

A suspicious glance, then Gesler shook his head. 'Was thinking of an old mage I knew. Kulp. Not that you remind me of him or anything, Bottle. You're more like Quick Ben, I think, than any of us are comfortable with. Last I saw of Kulp, though, was the poor bastard flung head over heels off the stern rail of a ship – in a firestorm. Always wondered what happened to him. I like to think he made it just fine, dropping out of that furnace of a warren and finding himself in some young widow's back garden, waist-deep in the cool waters of her fountain. Just as she was on her knees praying for salvation or something.' All at once he looked embarrassed and his gaze flicked away. 'Aye, I paint pretty pictures of what could be, since what is always turns out so damned bad.'

Bottle's grunt was soft, then he nodded. 'I like that, Sergeant. Kind of . . . relieves me.'

'Meaning?'

'Only, shows that you're not as far from the rest of us as it sometimes seems.'

Gesler grimaced. 'Then you'd be wrong, soldier. I'm a sergeant, which makes me as far from you and these other idiots as a cave bear from a damned three-legged stoat. Understood?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Now why are we still hiding here? There's smoke trickling up from that chimney, meaning we got folks inside. So, give us the damned go-ahead on this, Bottle, then your task's done, for now.'

'All right. I think there's two in there. Quiet, contemplative thoughts, no conversation yet.'

'Contemplative? As in what a cow thinks with a bellyful of feed in her and a calf tugging wet and hard at a teat? Or like some kind of giant two-headed snake that's just come down the chimney and swallowed up old Crud-nails and his missus?'

'Somewhere in between, I'd say.'

Gesler's expression turned into a glare; then, with a snort, he twisted round and hand-signalled. A moment later Uru Hela crawled past Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas – who was directly behind the sergeant – and came up on Gesler's left.

'Sergeant?'

'Bottle says there's two in there. I want you to walk up peaceful-like and call 'em out – you're thirsty and want to ask for a ladle or two from that well there.'

'I ain't thirsty, Sergeant.'

'Lie, soldier.'

Bottle could see the notion upset her. *Spirits fend, the things you find out . . .*

'How about I just ask to refill my waterskin?'

'Aye, that will do.'

'Of course,' she said, frowning, 'I'll need to empty it out first.'

'Why don't you do that?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

Gesler twisted to look at Bottle, and the young mage could plainly see the man's battle with pathos and despair. 'Get yourself ready,' he said, 'to hit 'em with a glamour or something, in case things go all wrong.'

Bottle nodded, then, seeing an entirely new expression on Gesler's face, he asked, 'What's wrong, Sergeant?'

'Well, either I just wet myself or Uru Hela's draining her waterskin. On some level,' he added, 'I think the distinction's moot.'

*That's it, Sergeant. You've just won me. Right there. Won me, so I'll give you what I got. From now on.* Yet, even with that quasi-serious notion, he had to turn his head away and bite hard on the sleeve of his tanned leather shirt. *Better yet, Sergeant, wait till we all see that fine wet patch on your crotch. You won't live this one down, no sir, not a chance of that. Oh, precious memory!*

Strapping her now empty waterskin onto her belt, Uru Hela then squirmed forward a little further, and climbed to her feet. Adjusting her heavy armour and plucking twigs and grass from metal joins and hinges, she tightened the helm strap and set out for the farmhouse.

'Oh,' Bottle muttered.

'What?' Gesler demanded.

'They're suddenly alert – I don't know, maybe one of them saw her through a crack in the window shutters – no, that's not right.'

'*What?* '

'Still not talking, but moving around now. A lot. Fast, too. Sergeant, I don't think they saw her. I think they *smelled* her. And us.'

'Smelled? Bottle—'

'Sergeant, I don't think they're human—'

Uru Hela was just passing the well, fifteen paces from the farmhouse's door, when that door flew open – pushed hard enough to tear it from its leather hinges – and the creature that surged into view seemed too huge to

even fit through the frame, coming up as if from stairs sunk steep below ground level – coming up, looming massive, dragging free an enormous single-bladed two-handed wood-axe—

Uru Hela halted, stood motionless as if frozen in place.

'Forward!' Gesler bellowed, scrambling upright as he swung up his crossbow—

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas charged past the sergeant, blade out—

Bottle realized his mouth was moving, yet no sounds came forth. He stared, struggling to comprehend. A demon.

A Hood-damned Kenryll'ah demon!

It had lunged clear of the doorframe and now charged straight for Uru Hela.

She threw her waterskin at it, then spun to flee, even as she tugged at her sword.

Not nearly fast enough to escape – the demon's huge axe slashed in a gleaming, blurred arc, caught the soldier solid in her left shoulder. Arm leapt away. Blood spurted from joins in the scales right across her entire back, as the blade's broad wedge drove yet deeper. Deeper, severing her spine, then further, tearing loose with her right scapula – cut halfway through – jammed on the gory blade as it whipped clear of Uru Hela's body.

More blood, so much more, yet the sudden overwhelming gouts of red quickly subsided – the soldier's heart already stopped, the life that was her mind already fleeing this corporeal carnage – and she was collapsing, forward, the sword in her right hand half drawn and never to go further, head dipping, chin to chest, then down, face-first onto the ground. A heavy sound. A thump. Whereupon all motion from her ceased.

Gesler's crossbow thudded, releasing a quarrel that sliced past Corabb, not a hand's breadth from his right shoulder.

A bellow of pain from the demon – the finned bolt sunk deep into its chest, well above its two hearts.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas closed fast, yelling something in the tribal tongue, something like '*Leoman's balls!* '

Gesler reloading on one knee. Stormy, Saltlick and Shortnose thundering past him, followed by Koryk and Tarr. Smiles swinging wide, crossbow in her hands – one of Fid's weapons, this one headed with a sharper – which she then trained on the farmhouse entrance, where a second demon had appeared. Oh, she was fast indeed, that quarrel flitting across the intervening space, making a strange warbling sound as it went, and the second demon, seeing it, somehow swinging his weapon – a tulwar – into its path – not much use, that gesture, as the sharper exploded.

Another scream of pain, the huge demon knocked back, off its feet, crashing into the side of the farmhouse. Wood, sod and chinking bowed inward, and as the demon fell, the entire wall on that side of the doorframe went with it.

*And what am I doing? Damn me, what am I doing?* Bottle leapt upright, desperately drawing on whatever warren first answered his summons.

The axe-wielding demon surged towards Corabb. The wedge-blade slashed its deadly arc. Struck Corabb's shield at an oblique angle, caromed upward and would have caught the side of Corabb's head if not for the man's stumbling, left knee buckling as he inadvertently stepped into a groundhog hole, losing his balance and pitching to one side. His answering sword-swing, which should have been batted aside by the demon's swing-through, dipped well under it, the edge *thunking* hard into the demon's right knee.

It howled.

In the next instant Stormy, flanked by his heavies, arrived. Swords chopping, shields clattering up against the wounded Kenryll'ah. Blood and pieces of meat spattered the air.

Another bellow from the demon as it launched itself backward, clear of the deadly infighting, gaining room to swing the wood-axe in a horizontal slash that crumpled all three shields lifting to intercept it. Banded metal and wood exploded in all directions. Saltlick grunted from a broken arm.

'Clear!' someone shouted, and Stormy and his heavies flung themselves backward. Corabb, still lying on the ground, rolled after them.

The demon stood, momentarily confused, readying its axe.

Smiles's hand-thrown sharper struck it on its left temple.

Bright light, deafening crack, smoke, and the demon was reeling away, one side of its bestial face obliterated into red pulp.

Yet Bottle sensed the creature's mind already righting itself.

Gesler was yelling. 'Withdraw! Everyone!'

Summoning all he had, Bottle assailed the demon's brain with Mockra. Felt it recoil, stunned.

From the ruined farmhouse, the second Kenryll'ah was beginning to clamber free.

Smiles tossed another sharper into the wreckage. A second snapping explosion, more smoke, more of the building falling down.

'We're pulling out!'

Bottle saw Koryk and Tarr hesitate, desperate to close in on the stunned demon. At that moment Fiddler and Cuttle arrived.

'Hood's balls!' Fiddler swore. 'Get moving, Koryk! Tarr! Move!'

Gesler was making some strange gesture. 'We go south! South!'

Saltlick and Shortnose swung in that direction, but Stormy pulled them back. 'That's called misdirection, y'damned idiots!'

The squads reforming as they moved, eastward, now in a run. The shock of Uru Hela's death and the battle that followed keeping them quiet now, just their gasping breaths, the sounds of armour like broken crockery underfoot. Behind them, smoke billowing from the farmhouse. An axe-wielding demon staggering about in a daze, blood streaming from its head.

Damned sharper should have cracked that skull wide open, Bottle well knew. *Thick bones, I guess.* Kenryll'ah, aye, not their underlings. No,

Highborn of Aral Gamelon, he was sure of that.

Stormy started up. 'Hood-damned demon farmers! They got Hood-damned demon farmers! Sowing seeds, yanking teats, spinnin' wool – and chopping strangers to pieces! Gesler, old friend, I hate this place, you hear me? *Hate it!* '

'Keep quiet!' Fiddler snarled. 'We was lucky enough all those sharpers didn't mince us on the road – now your bleating's telling those demons exactly where we're going!'

'I wasn't going to lose any more,' Stormy retorted in a bitter growl. 'I'd swore it—'

'Should've known better,' Gesler cut in. 'Damn you, Stormy, don't make promises you can't keep – we're in a fight here and people are going to die. No more promises, got me?'

A surly nod was his only answer.

They ran on, the end of a long, long night now tumbled over into day. For the others, Bottle knew, there'd be rest ahead. Somewhere. But not him. No, he'd need to work illusions to hide them. He'd need to flit from creature to creature out in the forest, checking on their backtrail. He needed to keep these fools alive.

Crawling from the wreckage of the farmhouse, the demon prince spat out some blood, then settled back onto his haunches and looked blearily around. His brother stood nearby, cut and lashed about the body and half his face torn away. Well, it had never been much of a face anyway, and most of it would grow back. Except maybe for that eye.

His brother saw him and staggered over. 'I'm never going to believe you again,' he said.

'Whatever do you mean?' The words were harsh, painful to utter. He'd inhaled some flames with that second grenade.

'You said farming was peaceful. You said we could just retire.'

'It was peaceful,' he retorted. 'All our neighbours ran away, didn't they?'

'These ones didn't.'

'Weren't farmers, though. I believe I can say that with some assurance.'

'My head hurts.'

'Mine too.'

'Where did they run to?'

'Not south.'

'Should we go after them, brother? As it stands, I'd have to venture the opinion that they had the better of us in this little skirmish, and that displeases me.'

'It's worth considering. My ire is awakened, after all. Although I suggest you find your matlock, brother, instead of that silly wood-axe.'

'Nearest thing within reach. And now I'll have to dig into our crumpled, smouldering abode – all that digging we did, all for nothing!'

At that moment they heard, distinctly, the sound of horses. Coming fast up the track.

'Listen, there's more of them. No time to find your matlock, brother. Let us set forth and commence our sweet vengeance, shall we?'

'Superior notion indeed. One of my eyes still works, which should suffice.'

The two Kenryll'ah demon princes set out for the cart path.

It was really not their day.

A quarter of a league now from the farmhouse, and Fiddler swung round, confirming for Bottle yet again that the old sergeant had hidden talents. 'Horses,' he said.

Bottle had sensed the same.

The squads halted, under bright sunlight, alongside a cobbled road left in bad repair. Another cluster of farm buildings awaited them a thousand paces

to the east. No smoke rising from the chimney. *No surprise with demons for neighbours, I suppose.*

The detonations were a drumbeat of thunderous concussions that shook the earth beneath them.

'Four!' Fiddler said with a savage grin.

Bottle saw Cuttle staring at the sergeant with undisguised awe and more than a little worship.

Smoke now, billowing in the distance, an earthen blot rising above the treeline.

'Let's make for that farm ahead,' Fiddler said. 'We'll rest up there for the day – I don't think our pursuers are in any condition to do much.'

'The drum,' Cuttle whispered. 'I seen it. The drum. Now I can die happy.'

Damned sappers. Bottle shook his head. There was pain there, now, in that mangled stretch of track a quarter league away. Human, beast, and . . . oh, and *demon. You'd have done better chasing us. Even so, what a mess we've made.*

Yes, plenty of pain, but more death. Flat, dwindling death, spreading dark as that dust in the air. Fiddler's drum. No better announcement imaginable, that the Malazans were here.

Thom Tissy's descent from the tree was a little loud, a little fast. In a skein of snapped branches, twigs, leaves and one abandoned wasp nest, the sergeant landed heavy and hard on his backside. 'Ow, gods below, gods below!'

'Ain't no god at that end, just a tailbone,' a soldier called out from the nearby squads.

Keneb waited for a few more heartbeats, then asked, 'Sergeant, tell me what you saw.'

Thom Tissy slowly, carefully, regained his feet. He walked about on his short bandy legs, squat as an ogre, replete with pocked face and warty

hands. 'Smoke, Fist, and plenty of it. Counted ten spots in all, one of 'em big – probably the thunder we heard a little while back – more than one cusser for sure. Maybe three, maybe more.'

Meaning someone was in desperate trouble. Keneb glanced away, scanned the motley soldiers hunkered down in the forest glade. 'Ten?'

'Aye, Fist. I guess we stirred 'em up some, enough so that the fighting's getting fierce. When the captain gets back, we'll find out some details, I suppose.'

Yes. Faradan Sort. But she and Beak had been away for days, almost a week now.

'Ten.'

'Expecting more, Fist?' Thom Tissy asked. 'My line of sight wasn't bad, but not perfect. I saw six on the north side, four on the south, putting us near dead centre and a half a night's travel behind. Anyway, the outermost smokes were right on the horizons, so we're still spread well out, the way we should be. And the smoke just tells us where bigger fights happened, not all the other little ambushes and the like. Something wrong, Fist?'

'Settle the squads in,' Keneb replied, turning away. Oh, aye, there was fighting going on. But nothing evenly matched. His marines were outnumbered; no chance of acquiring the allies they'd thought they'd get. True, they were loaded down with munitions, but the more mages arriving with the Edur and Letherii troops the more the sheer overwhelming imbalance would start to tell. His squads, even paired up, couldn't afford losses. Four or five dead and that threshold of effectiveness would have been crossed. There would have to be convergence, merging of survivors – and this leagues-long line of advance would start thinning out. Instead of gaining in strength and momentum as the advance began to close in on this empire's capital, the Malazan marines would in fact be weaker.

Of course, this invasion was not simply Keneb's covert marine advance. There were other elements – the Adjunct and Blistig's regular infantry, who would be led in the field, when that time came, by the terrifying but competent Captain Kindly. There were the Khundryl Burned Tears and the

Perish – although they were, for the moment, far away. A complicated invasion indeed.

*For us, here, all we need to do is sow confusion, cut supplies to the capital whenever we can, and just keep the enemy off balance, guessing, reacting rather than initiating. The fatal blows will come from elsewhere, and I need to remind myself of that. So that I don't try to do too much. What counts is keeping as many of my marines alive as possible – not that the Adjunct's tactics with us give me much chance of that. I think I'm starting to understand how the Bridgeburners felt, when they were being thrown into every nightmare, again and again.*

*Especially at the end. Pale, Darujhistan, that city called Black Coral.*

*But no, this is different. The Adjunct doesn't want us wiped out. That would be insanity, and she may be a cold, cold bitch, but she's not mad. At least not so it's showed, anyway.*

Keneb cursed himself. The strategy had been audacious, yes, yet founded on sound principles. On traditional principles, in fact. Kellanved's own, in the purpose behind the creation of the marines; in the way the sappers rose to pre-eminence, once the Moranth munitions arrived to revolutionize Malazan-style warfare. This was, in fact, the old, original way of employing the marines – although the absence of supply lines, no matter how tenuous or stretched, enforced a level of commitment that allowed no deviation, no possibility of retreat – *she burned the transports and not a Quorl in sight* – creating a situation that would have made the Emperor squirm.

Or not. Kellanved had known the value of gambles, had known how an entire war could shift, could turn on that single unexpected, outrageous act, the breaking of protocol that left the enemy reeling, then, all at once, entirely routed.

Such acts were what made military geniuses. Kellanved, Dassem Ultor, Sher'arah of Korel, Prince K'azz D'avore of the Crimson Guard. Caladan Brood. Coltaine. Dujek.

Did Adjunct Tavore belong in this esteemed company? *She's not shown it yet, has she? Gods above, Keneb, you've got to stop thinking like this. You'll*

*become another Blistig and one Blistig is more than enough.*

He needed to focus on the matters at hand. He and the marines were committed to this campaign, this bold gamble. Leave the others to do their part, believing at all times that they would succeed, that they would appear in their allotted positions when the moment arrived. They would appear, yes, with the expectation that he, Keneb, would do the same. With the bulk of his marines.

*Game pieces, aye. Leave the deciding hand to someone else. To fate, to the gods, to Tavore of House Paran, Adjunct to Noone. So bringing me round, damn this, to faith. Again. Faith. That she's not insane. That she's a military genius to rival a mere handful of others across the span of Malazan history.*

Faith. Not in a god, not in fate, but in a fellow mortal. Whose face he knew well, remembering with grim clarity its limited range of expression, through grief to anger, to her ferocious will to achieve . . . *whatever it is she seeks to achieve. Now, if only I knew what that was*.

Perhaps this kind of fighting was suited to the marines. But it was not suited to Keneb himself. Not as commander, not as Fist. It was hard not to feel helpless. He wasn't even in contact with his army, beyond sporadic murmurings among the squad mages. *I'll feel better when Faradan Sort returns.*

*If she returns.*

'Fist.'

Keneb turned. 'You following me round, Sergeant?'

'No sir,' Thom Tissy replied. 'Just thought I'd say, before I sack out, that, well, we understand.'

'Understand what? Who is "we"?'

'All of us, sir. It's impossible. I mean, for you. We know that.'

'Do you now?'

'Aye. You can't lead. You're stuck with following, and not knowing what in Hood's name is happening to your soldiers, because they're all over the place—'

'Go get some sleep, Sergeant. And tell the rest, I am not aware that any of this is impossible. We maintain the advance, and that is that.'

'Well, uh—'

'You presume too much, Sergeant. Now return to your squad, tell your soldiers to stow all the theorizing, and go get some sleep.'

'Aye, sir.'

Keneb watched the squat man walk away. Decent of him, all that rubbish. Decent, but pointless and dangerous. *We're not friends, Thom Tissy. Neither of us can afford that.*

After a moment, he allowed himself a wry smile. All of his complaints regarding Tavore, and here he was, doing the same damned thing that she did – pushing them all away.

Because it was necessary. Because there was no choice.

*So, if she's mad, then so am I.*

*Hood take me, maybe we all are.*

The long descent of the ice field stretched out before them, studded with the rubble and detritus that was all that remained of the Age of the Jaghut. They stood side by side, a body without a soul and a soul without a body, and Hedge wished he could be more mindful of that delicious irony, but as long as he could not decide which of them was more lost, the cool pleasure of that recognition evaded his grasp.

Beyond the ice field's ragged demise two thousand paces distant, copses of deciduous trees rose in defiant exuberance, broken here and there by glades green with chest-high grasses. This patchwork landscape extended onward, climbing modest hills until those hills lifted higher, steeper, and the forest canopy, unbroken now, was the darker green of conifers.

'I admit,' Hedge said, finally breaking the silence between them, 'I didn't expect anything like this. Broken tundra, maybe. Heaps of gravel, those dry dusty dunes stirred round by the winds. Mostly lifeless. Struggling, in other words.'

'Yes,' Emroth said in her rasping voice. 'Unexpected, this close to the Throne of Ice.'

They set out down the slope.

'I think,' Hedge ventured after a time, 'we should probably get around to discussing our respective, uh, destinations.'

The T'lan Imass regarded him with her empty, carved-out eyes. 'We have travelled together, Ghost. Beyond that, nothing exists to bind you to me. I am a Broken, an Unbound, and I have knelt before a god. My path is so ordained, and all that would oppose me will be destroyed by my hand.'

'And how, precisely, do you plan on destroying me, Emroth?' Hedge asked. 'I'm a Hood-forsaken ghost, after all.'

'My inability to solve that dilemma, Ghost, is the only reason you are still with me. That, and my curiosity. I now believe you intend something inimical to my master – perhaps, indeed, your task is to thwart me. And yet, as a ghost, you can do nothing—'

'Are you so sure?'

She did not reply. They reached to within thirty or so paces from the edge of the ice, where they halted again and the T'lan Imass shifted round to study him.

'Manifestation of the will,' Hedge said, smiling as he crossed his arms. 'Took me a long time to come up with that phrase, and the idea behind it. Aye, I am a ghost, but obviously not your usual kind of ghost. I persist, even unto fashioning this seemingly solid flesh and bone – where does such power come from? That's the question. I've chewed on this for a long time. In fact, ever since I opened my nonexistent eyes and realized I wasn't in Coral any longer. I was someplace else. And then, when I found myself in,

uh, familiar company, well, things got even more mysterious.' He paused, then winked. 'Don't mind me talking now, Emroth?'

'Go on,' she said.

Hedge's smile broadened, then he nodded and said, 'The Bridgeburners, Emroth. That's what we were called. An elite division in the Malazan Army. Pretty much annihilated at Coral – our last official engagement, I suppose. And that should have been that.

'But it wasn't. No. Some Tanno Spiritwalker gave us a song, and it was a very powerful song. The Bridgeburners, Emroth – the dead ones, that is; couldn't say either way for the few still alive – us dead ones, we *ascended*.

'Manifestation of the will, T'lan Imass. I'd hazard you understand that notion, probably better than I do. But such power didn't end with your cursed Ritual. No, maybe you just set the precedent.'

'You are not flesh without soul.'

'No, I'm more like your reflection. Sort of *inverted*, aye?'

'I sense no power from you,' Emroth said, head tilting a fraction. 'Nothing. You are not even here.'

Hedge smiled again, and slowly withdrew a cusser from beneath his raincape. He held it up between them. 'Is this, Emroth?'

'I do not know what that is.'

'Aye, but is it even here?'

'No. Like you it is an illusion.'

'An illusion, or a manifestation of the will? My will?'

'There is no value in the distinction,' the T'lan Imass asserted.

'You cannot see the truth within me, for the vision you'd need to see it is not within you. You threw it away, at the Ritual. You wilfully blinded yourselves to the one thing that can destroy you. That is, perhaps, destroying your kind even now – some trouble on the continent of Assail,

yes? I have vague recollections of somebody hearing something . . . well, never mind that. The point here, Emroth, is this: you cannot understand me because you cannot *see* me. Beyond, that is, what I have willed into existence – this body, this cusser, this face—'

'In which,' Emroth said, 'I now see my destruction.'

'Not necessarily. A lot depends on our little conversation here. You say you have knelt before a god – no, it's all right, I've already worked out who, Emroth. And you're now doing its bidding.' Hedge eyed the cusser in his hand. Its weight felt just right. *It's here, just like back at the Deragoth statues. No different at all.* 'I've walked a long way,' he resumed, 'starting out in the Jaghut underworld. I don't recall crossing any obvious borders, or stepping through any gates. And the ice fields we've been crossing for what must have been weeks, well, that made sense, too. In fact, I'm not even much surprised we found the Ice Throne – after all, where else would it be?' With his free hand he gestured at the forest-clad expanse before them. 'But this . . .'

'Yes,' said the T'lan Imass. 'You held to the notion of distinction, as do all your kind. The warrens. As if each was separate—'

'But they are,' Hedge insisted. 'I'm not a mage, but I knew one. A very good one, with more than a few warrens at his disposal. Each one is an aspect of power. There are barriers between them. And chaos at their roots, and threading in between.'

'Then what do you see here, Ghost?'

'I don't know, but it isn't Jaghut. Yet now, well, I'm thinking it's Elder, just like Jaghut. An Elder Warren. Which doesn't leave many options, does it? Especially since this is your destination.'

'In that you would be wrong,' Emroth replied.

'But you recognize it.'

'Of course. It is Tellann. Home.'

'Yet it's here, trapped in the Jaghut underworld, Emroth. How can that be?'

'I do not know.'

'If it's not your destination, then, I think I need to know if our finding it changes anything. For you, I mean.'

The head cocked yet further. 'And upon my answer hangs my fate, Ghost?'

Hedge shrugged. The cusser was too real all right: his arm had begun to ache.

'I have no answer for you,' Emroth said, and Hedge might have heard something like regret in the creature's voice, although more likely that was just his imagination. 'Perhaps, Ghost,' she continued after a moment, 'what we see here is an example of this *manifestation of the will*.'

The sapper's eyes widened. 'Whose?'

'In the Jaghut Wars, many T'lan Imass fell. Those who could not flee what remained of their bodies were left where they fell, for they had failed. On rare occasions, a Fallen would be gifted, so that its eternal vision looked out upon a vista rather than a stretch of ground or the darkness of earth. The T'lan Imass who were more thoroughly destroyed were believed to have found oblivion. True nonexistence, which we came to hold as the greatest gift of all.'

Hedge glanced away. These damned T'lan Imass were heartbreakers, in every sense of the term.

'Perhaps,' Emroth continued, 'for some, oblivion was not what they found. Dragged down into the Jaghut underworld, the Jaghut realm of death. A place without the war, without, perhaps, the Ritual itself.'

'Without the war? This is the Jaghut underworld – shouldn't it be filled with Jaghut? Their souls? Their spirits?'

'The Jaghut do not believe in souls, Ghost.'

Hedge stared, dumbfounded. 'But . . . that's ridiculous. If no souls, then how in Hood's name am I here?'

'It occurs to me,' Emroth said with rasping dryness, 'that manifestation of the will can go both ways.'

'Their disbelief annihilated their own souls? *Then why create an underworld?* '

'Verdith'anath is an ancient creation. It may be that the first Jaghut souls found it not to their liking. To create a realm of death is the truest manifestation of will, after all. And yet, what is created is not always solely what was willed. Every realm finds . . . resident beings. Every realm, once formed, is rife with bridges, gates, portals. If the Jaghut did not find it to their liking, other creatures did.'

'Like your T'lan Imass.'

'In the ages of ice that beset our kind,' Emroth said, 'there existed pockets of rich land, often surrounded in ice, yet resisting its fierce power. In these pockets, Ghost, the old ways of the Imass persisted. Places of forests, sometimes tundra, and, always, the beasts we knew so well. Our name for such a place was Farl ved ten ara. A refugium.'

Hedge studied the forested hills. 'There are Imass in there.'

'I believe that is so.'

'Do you intend to seek them out, Emroth?'

'Yes. I must.'

'And what of your new god?'

'If you would destroy me, do it now, Ghost.' With that she turned and began walking towards the Refugium.

Hedge stood, shifted the cusser to his right hand, and gauged distance. *The Crippled God would welcome more allies, wouldn't he just? You go, Emroth, to meet this timeless kin. With your words marshalled to sway them, to offer them a new faith. Your kin. Could be thousands of them. Tens of thousands.*

*But they're not what you came for.*

*Like me, Emroth, you're heading for the gate. Starvald Demelain. Where anything is possible.*

*Including the destruction of the warrens.*

*It's the blood, you see. The blood of dragons. Outside and inside. Dead and living. Aye, amazing the things you figure out once you're dead. But not dead. Aye, it's all about the will.*

The cusser returned to his left hand.

Arm angled back. Then swung forward. He watched the cusser's arc for the briefest of moments, then, as habit demanded, he pitched sideways, onto the ground—

Even as it lurched up to meet him, a stone cracking hard against his chin. The concussion had of course deafened him, and he stared about, spitting blood from his tooth-sliced tongue. His left arm was gone, as was most of his left hip and thigh. Snow and dust drifting down, sparkling in the sunlight. Pebbles and clods of frozen earth now landing all around him, bouncing, skittering. The snow in the air, sparkling like magic.

He spat more blood, felt his chin with his one remaining hand and found a deep gash there, studded with gravel. He scowled, dismissed these absurd details. No more blood, a tongue whole and ever eager to wag. Smooth chin, unmarred by any gash – well, more or less smooth, under all that stubble. New left leg, hip, arm. *Aye, that's better.*

The sapper climbed to his feet.

The crater was appropriately large, suitably deep, reaching down past the skin of ice and snow to the ground underneath, that now steamed sodden and glistening. Pieces of Emroth here and there. Not many. Cussers were like that, after all.

'Aye,' Hedge muttered, 'Fid's the sentimental one.'

Thirty, then thirty-five paces on, reaching the first sward of riotous grass, the sapper came upon one more fragment of Emroth's body. And he halted.

Stared down for some time. Then slowly turned and studied the way he had come, the borderline between ice and earth.

Farl ved ten ara. Refugium indeed. 'Shit,' he muttered. Worse yet, she'd told him. *A place without the Ritual itself.*

After a long moment, Hedge turned back to the forest ahead. He stepped over the torn, severed left leg lying bleeding in the grass. Flesh and blood, aye. A woman's leg. Damned shapely at that.

'Shit,' he said again, hurrying on. 'Fid's the soft-hearted one, that he is. Fiddler. Not me. Not me.' Wiping at his cheeks, cursing the ghost tears on his ghost face, and alone once more in this insipid, uninspiring realm of the dead, the Bridgeburner went on. Undead for a few hundred thousand years. Broken, Fallen, then resurrected, enough to walk once more. And, finally, thirty or so paces from a return to life . . .

A grim lesson about keeping the wrong company.

Seeking the forest. Beneath the thick branches at last, the heavy fluttering of a new season's painfully green leaves. Spin and whirl of insects, the chitter of birds. Into the forest, aye, beyond the sight of that severed limb, the borderland, the steaming crater.

*Shit!*

'Damned soft of you, Fid. But we're at war, like I keep telling you. We're at war. And I don't care if it's a damned Jaghut Bridge of Death, it's still a bridge, and you know what we do to bridges, don't you?'

Refugium.

*But no refuge for me.*

The emlava kittens were heavy as cattle dogs but shorter of leg and nowhere near as energetic. All they wanted to do was sleep. And feed. For the first few days, carrying them invited deadly fits of lashing talons and terrifying lunges with jaws opened wide. Unmindful of macabre irony, Onrack used their mother's skinned hide to fashion a sack. Ends affixed to a

cut sapling, the Imass and either Quick Ben or Trull would then carry between them the two hissing, thrashing creatures in their ghastly bag.

The ay never came close again.

A male and a female, their grey fur not yet banded and the pale hue of ashes rather than the dark iron of their mother. In the cave there had been a third one, dead a week or more. From the condition of its body, its siblings had decided on eliminating it. So fared the weak in this and every other world.

Trull's sense of wonder was reawakened every time he glanced across at Onrack. A friend in the flesh was truly a revelation. He had imagined himself long past such profound, prolonged astonishment. The day he had been Shorn by his brother, it had seemed to him that his heart had died. Chained to stone, awaiting the cold water and the rot that it promised, the muscle that forged the tides of his blood seemed to beat on in some kind of waning inertia.

The desiccated corpse that was Onrack, walking up to where he had been bound, had even then seemed an unlikely salvation.

Trull recalled he'd had to argue with the T'lan Imass to win his own release. The thought amused him still. Creaking sinew and cabled muscle and torque-twisted bone, Onrack had been the personification of indifference. As unmindful of life and its struggle to persist as only a lifeless thing could be.

And so Trull had simply tagged along, unwilling to admit to himself the burgeoning truth of his salvation – his reluctant return to life in the company of an undead warrior who had begun to discover his own life, the memories once thought surrendered, to time and cruel ritual, to wilful denial spanning tens of thousands of years.

What had bound them together? What improbable menagerie of terse conversations, unanticipated emotions and the shared extremity of combat had so thoroughly entwined them together, now as brothers yet more a brother than any of those with whom Trull Sengar shared blood? *We stood*

*side by side, together facing certain defeat. Only to find blessing in the timid hand of a creature not even half human. Oh, I know her well, that one.*

*Yet she is a secret I find I cannot share with Onrack, with my friend. Now, if only he was as coy, as guarded. Not this . . . this open regard, this casting away of every natural, reasonable defence. This childness – by the Sisters, Trull, at least find yourself a word that exists. But he seems so young! Not of age, but of cast. A species of unmitigated innocence – is such a thing even possible?*

Well, he might know the answer to that soon enough. They had found signs as they trekked this youthful world. Camps, hearthstones lining firepits. Places where stone tools had been made, a flat boulder where an Imass had sat, striking flakes from flint, leaving behind a half-circle scatter of splinters. Refuse pits, filled with bones charred white or boiled to extract the fat, leaving them crumbly and light as pumice; scorched shell fragments from the gourds used to heat the bones in water; and the shattered rocks that had been plunged hot into that water to bring it to a boil. Signs of passing this way, some only a few weeks old, by Onrack's estimations.

Did those Imass know that strangers had come among them? To this even Onrack had no answer. His kind were shy, he explained, and cunning. They might watch from hiding places for days, nights, and only when they so chose would they reveal enough to touch Onrack's senses, his animal awareness with its instinctive whispering. *Eyes are upon us, friends. It is time.*

Trull waited for those words.

The emlava kits yowled, announcing their hunger.

Trull, who had taken point whilst Onrack and the wizard carried the beasts in their sack, halted and turned about.

Time for feeding. Else not a single moment of peace.

Groaning, Quick Ben set down his end of the sling-pole, watched bemusedly as the two kits spat and clawed their way free of the skin, hissing at each other then at Onrack, who began withdrawing leaf-wrapped

hunks of raw antelope. The meat was foul, but clearly this was no deterrent for the emlava cubs as they lunged towards him.

The Imass flung the meat onto the ground to spare his own hands, and then stepped away with an odd smile on his face.

Too many odd smiles these days, the wizard thought. As if the blinding wonder and joy had begun to dim – not much, only a fraction, yet Quick Ben believed it was there, a hint of dismay. He was not surprised. No-one could sustain such pure pleasure indefinitely. And, for all this seeming paradise – at least a paradise by Imass standards – there remained something vaguely unreal about it. As if it was no more than an illusion, already begun to fray at the edges.

No real evidence of that, however. The wizard could *feel* the health of this place. It was strong, and, he now suspected, it was growing. As Omtose Phellack waned on all sides. The end of an age, then. An age that had ended everywhere else long, long ago. *But isn't Tellann itself dead everywhere else? Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's just changed, grown into itself. Maybe, everywhere else, what we're seeing – what we're living in – is Tellann ascendant, victor in the war of millennia past, dominant and secure in its maturity. Is that possible?*

Yet that did not mesh with Onrack, with how he had been and how he was now. Unless . . . *gods below, unlike everywhere else, this is one fragment of Tellann that lies, somehow, beyond the Ritual. That is why he is flesh and blood here. In this place, there was no Ritual of Tellann, no severing of Imass souls. Suggesting that the Imass living here know nothing about it.*

*So what would happen if Logros led his thousands here? If Kron— But no, Silverfox wouldn't permit that. She needed them for something else. For another war.*

It'd be nice to know how this fragment related to the one created for the Wolves at the end of the Pannion War. From what Quick Ben had understood, that Beast Hold, or whatever it had been called, had been seeded with the souls of T'lan Imass. Or at least the memories of those souls – *could be that's all a soul really is: the bound, snarled mass of memories*

*from one life. Huh. Might explain why mine is such a mess. Too many lives, too many disparate strands all now tangled together . . .*

Trull Sengar had set off in search of water – springs bubbled up from bedrock almost everywhere, as if even the stone itself was saturated with glacial melt.

Onrack eyed the cats for another moment then turned to Quick Ben. 'There is a sweep of ice beyond these hills,' he said. 'I can smell its rot – an ancient road, once travelled by Jaghut. Fleeing slaughter. This intrusion, wizard, troubles me.'

'Why? Presumably that battle occurred thousands of years ago and the Jaghut are all dead.'

'Yes. Still, that road reminds me of . . . things. Awakens memories . . .'

Quick Ben slowly nodded. 'Like shadows, aye.'

'Just so.'

'You had to know it couldn't last.'

The Imass frowned, the expression accentuating his strangely unhuman, robust features. 'Yes, perhaps I did, deep within me. I had . . . forgotten.'

'You're too damned hard on yourself, Onrack. You don't need to keep yourself shining so bright all the time.'

Onrack's smile held sadness. 'I gift my friend,' he said quietly, 'for all the gifts he has given me.'

Quick Ben studied the warrior's face. 'The gift loses its value, Onrack, if it goes on too long. It begins to exhaust us, all of us.'

'Yes, I see that now.'

'Besides,' the wizard added, watching the two emlava, their bellies full, now mock-fighting on the blood-smeared grass, 'showing your fallible side is another kind of gift. The kind that invites empathy instead of just awe. If that makes any sense.'

'It does.'

'You've been making lots of paints, haven't you?'

A sudden smile. 'You are clever. When I find a wall of stone that speaks . . . yes, a different kind of gift. My forbidden talents.'

'Forbidden? Why?'

'It is taboo among my people to render our own forms in likeness to truth. Too much is captured, too much is trapped in time. Hearts can break, and betrayals breed like vermin.'

Quick Ben glanced up at Onrack, then away. *Hearts can break. Aye, the soul can haunt, can't it just.*

Trull Sengar returned, waterskins sloshing. 'By the Sisters,' he said to Onrack, 'is that a frown you're wearing?'

'It is, friend. Do you wish to know why?'

'Not at all. It's just, uh, well, a damned relief, to be honest.'

Onrack reached down and snagged one of the cubs, lifting it by the scruff of its neck. The beast hissed in outrage, writhing as he held it up. 'Trull Sengar, you may explain to our friend why Imass are forbidden to paint likenesses of themselves. You may also tell him my story, so that he understands, and need not ask again why I am awakened to pain within me, recalling now, as I do, that mortal flesh is only made real when fed by the breath of love.'

Quick Ben studied Onrack with narrowed eyes. *I don't recall asking anything like that. Well, not out loud, anyway.*

Trull Sengar's relieved expression fell away and he sighed, but it was a loose sigh, the kind that marked the unbinding of long-held tensions. 'I shall. Thank you, Onrack. Some secrets prove a heavy burden. And when I am done revealing to Quick Ben one of the details of your life that has served to forge our friendship, I will then tell you both of my own secret. I will tell you of the Eres'al and what she did to me, long before she appeared to us all in the cavern.'

A moment of long silence.

Then Quick Ben snorted. 'Fine. And I'll tell a tale of twelve souls. And a promise I made to a man named Whiskeyjack – a promise that has brought me all this way, with farther still to go. And then, I suppose, we shall all truly know each other.'

'It is,' Onrack said, collecting the second cub so he could hold both beasts up side by side, 'a day for gifts.'

From beyond the hills there came the sound of thunder.

That faded, and did not repeat.

The emlava were suddenly quiet.

'What was that?' Trull Sengar asked.

Quick Ben could feel his heart pound in his chest. 'That, friends, was a cusser.'

Fiddler made his way across the dirt floor of the barn to where Bottle slept. He stared down at the young soldier curled up beneath a dark grey blanket. *Poor bastard.* He nudged with his foot and Bottle groaned. 'Sun's set,' Fiddler said.

'I know, Sergeant. I watched it going down.'

'We've rigged a stretcher. Just get up and eat something and then you've got a mobile bed for the rest of the night.'

'Unless you need me.'

'Unless we need you, aye.'

Bottle sat up, rubbed at his face. 'Thanks, Sergeant. I don't need the whole night – half will do.'

'You take what I give you, soldier. Cut it short and we could all end up regretting it.'

'All right, fine, make me feel guilty, then. See if I care.'

Smiling, Fiddler turned away. The rest of the squad was readying the gear, a few muted words drifting between the soldiers. Gesler and his crew were in the abandoned farmhouse – no point in crowding up all in one place. Poor tactics anyway.

There had been no pursuit. The drum had done its work. But that was four cussers lost, to add to the others they'd already used. Down to two left and that was bad news. If another enemy column found them . . . *we're dead or worse*.

Well, marines weren't supposed to have it easy. Good enough that they were still alive.

Cuttle approached. 'Tarr says we're ready, Fid.' He glanced over at Bottle. 'I got the sorry end of the stretcher to start, soldier. You better not have gas.'

Bottle, a mouthful of nuts and lard bulging his cheeks, simply stared up at the sapper.

'Gods below,' Cuttle said, 'you're eating one of those Khundryl cakes, ain't ya? Well, Fid, if we need us a torch to light the way—'

'Permission denied, Cuttle.'

'Aye, probably right. It'd light up half the night sky. Hood's breath, why do I always get the short twig?'

'So long as you face off against Corabb on that kind of thing,' Fiddler said, 'short's your middle name.'

Cuttle edged closer to Fiddler and said in a low voice, 'That big bang yesterday's gonna draw down a damned army—'

'Assuming they've fielded one. So far, we're running into companies, battalion elements – as if an army's dispersed, which is more or less what we expected them to do. No point in maintaining a single force when your enemy's scattered right across Hood's pimply backside. If they were smart they'd draw up reserves and saturate the region, leave us not a single deer trail to slink along.'

'So far,' Cuttle said, squinting through the gloom at the rest of the squad and massaging his roughly healed shoulder, 'they ain't been very smart.'

'Moranth munitions are new to them,' Fiddler pointed out. 'So's our brand of magic. Whoever's in command here is probably still reeling, still trying to guess our plans.'

'My guess is whoever was in command, Fid, is now Rannalled in tree branches.'

Fiddler shrugged, then lifted his pack onto his shoulders and collected his crossbow.

Corporal Tarr checked his gear one last time, then straightened. He drew his left arm through the shield straps, adjusted his sword belt, then tightened the strap of his helm.

'Most people just carry their shields on their backs,' Koryk said from where he stood by the barn's entrance.

'Not me,' said Tarr. 'Get ambushed and there's no time to ready, is there? So I stay readied.' He then rolled his shoulders to settle his scaled hauberk, a most familiar, satisfying rustle and clack of iron. He felt unsteady on his feet without that solid, anchoring weight. He had quick-release clasps for his pack of equipment, could drop all that behind him one-handed even as he stepped forward and drew his sword. At least one of them in this squad had to be first to the front, after all, to give them time to bring whatever they had to bear.

This was what he had been trained to do, from the very beginning. Braven Tooth had seen it true enough, seen into Tarr's stolid, stubborn soul, and he'd said as much, hadn't he? *'Your name's Tarr, soldier. It's under your feet and you're stuck fast. When needs be. It's your job, from now on. You hold back the enemy at that first blink of contact, you make your squad survive that moment, aye? Now, you ain't solid enough yet. Strap on these extra weights, soldier, then get sparring . . .'*

He liked the idea of being immovable. He liked the idea of being corporal, too, especially the way he hardly ever had to say anything. He had

a good squad for that. Fast learners. Even Smiles. Corabb he wasn't too sure about. Aye, the man had Oponn's wink true enough. And no shortage of courage. But it seemed he always had to get there first, before Tarr himself. Trying to prove something, of course. No mystery there. As far as the squad was concerned, Corabb was a recruit. More or less. Well, maybe he was a bit past that – nobody called him Recruit, did they? Even if Tarr still thought of him that way.

But Corabb had dragged Fiddler out. All by himself. A damned prisoner, and he'd done that. Saved the sergeant's life. Almost enough to excuse him being at Leoman's side as the two of them lured the Bonehunters into Y'Ghatan's fiery nightmare.

Almost.

Aye, Tarr knew he wasn't the forgiving kind. Not the forgetting kind, either. And he knew, deep down inside, that he'd stand for every soldier in his squad, stand till he fell. Except, maybe, for Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas.

Koryk taking far point, they headed out into the night.

Along the edge of the nearest stand of trees, on the path between those boles and the edge of the fallow field, they silently merged with Gesler and his squad. Setting out in darkness beneath burgeoning stars.

Stormy's heavies were good to have around, Tarr decided. Almost as tough and stubborn as he was. Too bad, though, about Uru Hela. But she'd been careless, hadn't she? Even if you're carrying a waterskin, the least you should have at the ready was a shield. Even more appalling, she'd turned and run, exposing her back.

*Should've sent me to do all that. Demon or no, I'd have stood to meet the bastard. Stood, and held.*

*'Remember your name, Tarr. And just to help you remember it, come over here and listen to your Master Sergeant, while I tell you a tale. About another soldier with tar under his feet. His name was Temper, and on the day Dassem Ultor fell, outside Y'Ghatan, well, here then is that tale . . .'*

Tarr had listened, all right. Enough to know that a man like that couldn't have existed, except in the mind of Master Sergeant Braven Tooth. But it had been inspiring anyway. Temper, a good name, a damned good name. Almost as good as Tarr.

Three paces behind her corporal, Smiles scanned to either side as they moved along the trail, eyes restless with unease, senses awakened to such acuity her skull ached. Bottle was sleeping. Which meant no tiny spying eyes checking out the area, no forest animals tricked into succumbing to Bottle's puny will, that empathy of similar brain size and intelligence that had so well served them all thus far.

And their damned corporal, all clicking scales and creaking leather, who probably couldn't put fifteen words together in any reasonable, understandable order. Fine enough jamming a breach, with his ridiculous oversized shield – the only one left after that demon took care of the ones used by the heavies – and his short thick-bladed sword. The kind of soldier who'd hold his ground even when dead. Useful, aye, but as a corporal? She couldn't figure that.

No, Fid would have been better served with a quick-witted, fast, nasty and hard-to-hit kind of corporal. Well, there was one consolation, and that was anyone could see she was next in line. And it'd been close back there, hadn't it? Could've been Tarr sent out to say hello to that demon, and that would have been that. She'd now be Corporal Smiles, and look sharp there, y'damned fish-sniffers.

But never mind Tarr. It was Koryk who was riding her, uh, mind. A killer, oh yes, a real killer. Sort of like her but without the subtlety, and that made the two of them a good match. Dangerous, scary, the core of the nastiest squad in the Bonehunters. Oh, Balm's crew might argue that, especially that yelping Throatslitter, but they were lounging round on a damned island right now, weren't they? Not out here doing what marines were supposed to do, infiltrating, kicking the white squirmy balls outa Edur and Letherii and blowing up the occasional company just to remind Hood who did all the delivering.

She liked this life, yes she did. Better than that squalid existence she'd climbed out of back home. Poor village girl cowering in the ghostly shadow of a dead sister. Wondering when the next vanishing of the shoals would spell her watery demise. Oh, but the boys had wanted her once she'd been the only one left, wanted to fill that shadow with their own, as if that was even possible.

But Koryk here, well, that was different. Felt different, anyway. Because she was older now, she supposed. More experienced, so much so that she now knew what stirred her little winged flutter-bird. Watching Koryk kill people, ah, that had been so sweet, and lucky everyone else was too busy to have heard her moan and nearly squeal and guess what it'd meant.

Revelations were the world's sharpest spice, and she'd just had a noseful. Making the night somehow clearer, cleaner. Every detail blade-edged, eager to be seen, noted by her glittering eyes. She heard the small creatures moving through the scrub of the fallow field, heard the frogs race up the boles of nearby trees. Mosquito hum and—

A sudden blinding flash to the south, a bloom of fiery light lifting skyward above a distant treeline. A moment later the rumble of twin detonations reached them. Everyone motionless now, crouched down. The small creatures frozen, quivering, terrified.

'Bad time for an ambush,' Koryk muttered as he worked his way back, slipping past Tarr.

'So not one sprung by Malazan marines,' Fiddler said, moving up to meet Koryk and Tarr. 'That was a league away, maybe less. Anyone recall which squads were to our right first night?'

Silence.

'Should we head over, Sergeant?' Tarr asked. He had drawn his shortsword. 'Could be they need our help.'

Gesler arrived. 'Stormy says he heard sharpers after the cussers,' the sergeant said. 'Four or five.'

'Could be the ambush got turned,' Smiles said, struggling to control her breathing. *Oh, take us there, you damned sergeant. Let me see Koryk fight again. It's this itch, you see . . .*

'Not in our orders,' Fiddler said. 'If they've been mauled, the survivors will swing north or south and come looking for friends. We keep going.'

'They come up to find us and they might have a thousand enemy on their heels,' Gesler said.

'Always a possibility,' Fiddler conceded. 'All right, Koryk, back on point. We go on, but with extra stealth. We're not the only ones to see and hear that, so we might run into a troop riding hard across our path. Set us a cautious pace, soldier.'

Nodding, Koryk set out along the trail.

Smiles licked her lips, glowered at Tarr. 'Put the damned pig-sticker away, Tarr.'

'That's "Corporal" to you, Smiles.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Hood's breath, it's gone to his head.'

'And those aren't knives in your hands?'

Smiles sheathed them, said nothing.

'Go on,' Fiddler ordered them. 'Koryk's waiting.'

Corabb picked up his end of the stretcher again and set out after the others. Bottle had slept through that distant succession of explosions. Sign of just how exhausted the poor man was. Still, it was unnerving not having him awake and keeping an eye on things, the way he could leap from animal to animal. Birds, too. And even insects. Although Corabb wondered just how far an insect could see.

He reached up and crushed a mosquito against one eyelid. The stretcher pitched behind him and he heard Cuttle swear under his breath. Corabb quickly regained his hold on the sapling. Damned insects, he needed to stop thinking about them. Because thinking about them led to hearing and

feeling them, crawling and biting everywhere and him with both hands used up. This wasn't like the desert. You could see chigger fleas coming on the wind, could hear a bloodfly from five paces, could pretty much guess that under every rock or stone there was a scorpion or a big hairy spider or a snake all of which wanted to kill you. Simple and straightforward, in other words. None of this devious whispering in the night, this whining at the ear, this winged flit up a man's nostril. Or crawling into the hair to take nips of flesh that left a swollen, oozing, damnably itching hole.

And then there were the slithery things that sucked blood. Hid under leaves waiting for some poor bastard handless soldier to go past. And ticks. And plants that, when one brushed innocently against them, started up an awful itching rash that then leaked some kind of oil – this was a true underworld, peopled by demon farmers and every life form of the night a raving, rapacious devourer of desertborn men. And never mind the Tiste Edur and the spineless Letherii. Imagine, fighting at the behest of tyrannical masters. Had they no pride? Might be smart to take a prisoner or two, just to get some answers. A Letherii. He might mention the idea to the sergeant. Fiddler was all right with suggestions. In fact, the entire Malazan Army seemed all right with that kind of thing. Sort of a constant warrior gathering, when anyone could speak up, anyone could argue, and thus decisions were forged. Of course, among the tribes, when that gathering was done, argument ended.

No, the Malazans did almost everything differently, their own way. Corabb wasn't bothered by that any more. It was probably a good thing he had held to so many ignorant, outrageous beliefs about them back when he was among the rebels. Otherwise, he might have found it hard to hate the enemy the way he was supposed to, the way it needed to be.

*But now I know what it means to be a marine in the Malazan Army, even if the empire's decided we're outlaws or something. Still marines. Still the elite and that's worth fighting for – the soldier at your side, the one in the stretcher, the one on point. Not sure about Smiles, though. Not sure about her at all. Reminds me of Dunsparrow, with that knowing look in her eyes and the way she licks her lips whenever someone talks about killing. And those knives – no, not sure about her at all.*

At least they had a good corporal, though. A tough bastard not interested in words. Shield and sword did all Tarr's talking, and Corabb always found himself rushing forward to stand at the man's side in every scrap. Swordarm side, but a step forward since Tarr used that short-bladed sticker so his parrying was foreshortened and that risked too much close-in stuff, the quick dirty underhanded kind – the style the desert tribes would use against a shield-wall soldier like Tarr – when there was no shieldwall, when it was just the one man, flank exposed and guard too tight. Batter and wail at the shield until his knees bent a fraction more and he ducked in behind and below that shield, left leg forward – then just sidestep and slip round the shield, over or under that stabbing shortsword, to take arm tendons or the unprotected underarm.

Corabb knew he needed to protect Tarr on that side, even if it meant disobeying Fiddler's orders about staying close to Bottle. So long as Bottle looked to be out of trouble, Corabb would move forward, because he understood Tarr and Tarr's way of fighting. Not like Koryk, who was more the desert warrior than any other in these two squads, and what he needed fending his flanks was someone like Smiles, with her flicking knives, crossbow quarrels and the like. Staying back and to one side, out of range of Koryk's frenzied swings of his longsword, and take down the enemy that worked in from the flanks. A good pairing, that.

Cuttle, the miserable old veteran, he had his cussers, and if Bottle got in danger the sapper would take care of things. Was also pretty sharp and quick with the crossbow, an old hand at the release and load-while-you-run.

It was no wonder Seven Cities was conquered the first time round, with Malazan marines in the field. Never mind the T'lan Imass. They'd only been let loose at the Aren uprising, after all. *And if Fiddler's telling the truth, that wasn't the Emperor at all. No, it was Laseen who'd given the order.*

*Gesler ain't convinced, so the truth is, no-one knows the truth. About Aren. Just like, I suppose, pretty soon no-one will know the truth about Coltaine and the Chain of Dogs, or – spirits below – the Adjunct and the Bonehunters at Y'Ghatan, and at Malaz City.*

He felt a chill whisper through him then, as if he'd stumbled onto something profound. About history. As it was remembered, as it was told and retold. As it was lost to lies when the truth proved too unpleasant. *Something, aye . . . Something . . . Damn! Lost it!*

From the stretcher behind him, Bottle muttered in his sleep, then said, distinctly: 'He never sees the owl. That's the problem.'

*Poor bastard. Raving in delirium. Exhausted. Sleep easy, soldier, we need you.*

*I need you. Like Leoman never needed me, that's how I need you. Because I'm a marine now. I suppose.*

'Ask the mice,' Bottle said. 'They'll tell you.' He then mumbled something under his breath, before sighing and saying: 'If you want to live, pay attention to the shadow. The shadow. The owl's shadow.'

At the other end of the stretcher, Cuttle grunted then shook the handles until Bottle groaned again and edged onto his side. Whereupon the young mage fell silent.

They continued on through the night. And once more, sometime later, they heard detonations in the distance again. These ones to the north.

Oh, they'd stirred 'em awake all right.

Shurq Elalle's herbs were getting stale. It had been all right out on the *Undying Gratitude*, on a wind-whipped deck and in the privacy of her cabin. And with a man with no nose for company. But now she found herself in a cramped map room with a half-dozen foreigners and Shake Brullyg, the eponymous king of this miserable little island, and – especially among the women – she could see their nostrils wrinkle as they caught unpleasant aromas in the turgid, over-warm air.

Oh well. If they wanted to deal with her, they'd have to live with it. And be grateful for that 'living' part. She eyed the Adjunct, who never seemed to want to actually sit down; and although she stood behind the chair she had claimed at one end of the long, scarred table, hands resting on its back, she

revealed none of the restlessness one might expect from someone for whom sitting felt like a sentence in a stock in the village square.

When it came to looks, there was not much to this Tavore Paran. Studious drab, sexless indifference, the wardrobe of the uncaring. A woman for whom womanly charms had less value than the lint in the creases of a coin purse. She could have made herself more attractive – almost feminine, in fact – if she so chose. But clearly such charms did not count as valuable assets to the Adjunct's notions of command. And this was interesting, in a vague, academic sort of way. A leader who sought to lead without physical presence, without heroic or lustful or any other sort of imaginable grandeur. And so, with nary a hint of personality, what was Tavore left with?

Well, Shurq considered, there was her mind. Some kind of tactical genius? She wasn't sure of that. From what Shurq had gathered from the fragmented mutterings of Balm's squad, some vast error in judgement had already occurred. Seemed there had been an advance landing of some sort. Elite troops, creeping onto the wild shore and its tangled swamps and forests in the dead of night. Soldiers with a mission to sow confusion and destabilize the Edur rule, and so stir the downtrodden Letherii into uprising.

Tactical genius? More like bad intelligence. The Letherii liked things just fine. This Tavore may well have condemned to slaughter a vital element of her army. They'd burned the transports – *and what was that about? Leaving her own troops with no choice but to go on? That stinks of distrust, of no confidence – aye, that stinks worse than I do. Unless I'm reading it all wrong. Which is a distinct possibility. There's nothing simple about these Malazans.*

The Malazan Empire, aye. But nothing like the Letherii Empire, with its petty games of bloodlines and racial hierarchy. No, these Malazans came in all styles indeed. Look at Tavore's aide – a stunning tattooed barbarian whose every movement was sensuality personified. Anyone looking that savage and primitive would be cleaning stalls here in the Letherii Empire. And there was Masan Gilani, another invitation to manly blubbering – oh, how Shurq wished she had skin that luscious, burnished hue, and the graceful, leonine lines of those long legs and full thighs, the swell of

unsagging breasts with nipples that made her think of overripe figs – *not that I needed to peek, she's got less modesty than me and that's saying a lot indeed. So, Tavore keeps the pretty ones close. Now that might be a telling hint.*

'What are we waiting for?' Shake Brullyg demanded, close to being drunk enough to start slurring his words. He slouched in the chair at the other end of the long table, directly opposite the Adjunct but with his heavy-lidded eyes fixed on Masan Gilani. The man truly believed that lascivious leers could make a woman swoon with desire. Yet Masan Gilani hid her disgust well, playing it along to keep the pathetic king dangling. The barbaric soldier was following very specific orders, Shurq suspected. To keep Brullyg from getting belligerent. Until they didn't need him any more.

Well, that wouldn't work with her, now, would it? Unless these Malazans had an Ublala Pung hidden nearby. Oh, that would be unfortunate indeed, to see her dissolving into an insatiable rutting animal in front of everyone. That was one secret she had better keep to herself. 'Relax, Brullyg,' she said. 'All of this has to do with those huge trimarans that sailed into harbour last night.' She'd love to have one of those, too, although she'd need two crews which meant less coin for everyone – *damned logistics, always getting in the way of my dreams*.

The Adjunct was eyeing her now, one of those gauging regards she settled on Shurq Elalle whenever the undead pirate said anything. Her own fault, actually – Shurq had sent Skorgen back to the *Undying Gratitude*. Her first mate's unfortunate assortment of afflictions had proved far too distracting for everyone else, until she realized he was becoming a liability, undermining her . . . professionalism. *Yes, that's the word I was looking for. Got to be taken seriously here. I suspect my very existence depends on it.* But she now found herself missing his weeping hole in the face, his mangled ear, blinded eye, stumped arm and bad leg – anything to swing away Tavore's attention every time she was unwise enough to voice an opinion or observation.

Throatslitter, who sat opposite Shurq, now cleared his throat – producing an odd squeak – and smiled across at her.

She looked away, pointedly. That man was not a nice man. The way Gerun Eberict hadn't been a nice man. Took too much pleasure in his job, she suspected. And even for a soldier, that wasn't sensible. People like that tended to linger when lingering wasn't good. Tended to put other soldiers at risk. Tended to get carried away. No, she didn't like Throatslitter.

Yet her glance away had inadvertently shifted her attention to Corporal Deadsmell. *Oh, funny name, that.* In some ways, that man was even worse. No secrets from him, she suspected, no matter how coy she was – yes, he could smell her, and not stale herbs either. *Had* smelled her, from the very start. *Had it been some bastard like him who wove the curse now afflicting me?* No, that wasn't right. Deadsmell had talents unknown here on Lether. Talents that made her think of that dying tower in Letheras, and Kettle, and the barrows in the yard.

Fortunately, he was dozing at the moment, bearded chin on his broad chest, thus sparing her his knowing look.

*Ah, if only Tehol Beddict was here with me – he'd have them all reeling. In confusion or laughter? Laughter would be bad, very bad. For me. For anyone sitting too close to me. Very well, forget Tehol Beddict. I must be losing my mind.*

The Adjunct addressed her. 'Captain, I have spoken at length with Shake Brullyg, seeking to complete my understanding of this Letherii Empire. Yet I find his replies increasingly unsatisfactory—'

'Poor Brullyg's despondent,' Shurq said. 'And lovelorn. Well, perhaps unrequited lust is more accurate a description for his sordid, uncommunicative state of mind.' *Hah, she could out-Tehol Tehol Beddict! With no risk of laughing either!*

Brullyg blinked at her.

Sergeant Balm leaned towards Throatslitter. 'What did she just say?'

'The Emperor,' said Tavore.

Shurq frowned, but waited.

'Of a Thousand Deaths.'

'The title's an exaggeration, I'm sure. Maybe a few hundred. Champions. They all die, eventually.'

'Presumably he is well protected by his Edur in the palace.'

Shurq Elalle shrugged. 'Not many details creep out of the Eternal Domicile, Adjunct. The Chancellor and his entire staff – Letherii – were retained after the conquest. There is also, now, a very powerful secret police, also Letherii. As for the economic apparatus, well, that too is Letherii.'

The tattooed woman named Lostara Yil snorted. 'Then what in Hood's name are the Edur doing? Where do they fit?'

'On top,' Shurq replied. 'Wobbling.'

There was a long moment of silence.

'Yet,' Tavore finally said, 'the Edur Emperor cannot be killed.'

'That is true.' Shurq watched as these details worked their way through the Malazans, with the exception of Deadsmell, of course, whose snores were waves rolling ashore in the little dank cavern of a room.

'Is that,' Tavore asked, 'irrelevant?'

'Sometimes seems that way,' Shurq conceded. Oh, she wished she could drink wine without its draining out everywhere. She could do with a tankard or two.

'An Emperor whose very rule is dictated by the sword,' Tavore said. 'What remain unhoned, however, are the necessities of administering an empire.'

'Very dull necessities, aye,' Shurq said, smiling.

'The Tiste Edur, leaning hard against the undying solidity of their ruler, exist under the delusion of mastery,' Tavore continued. 'But reality is not so generous.'

Nodding, Shurq Elalle said, 'The Tiste Edur were fisher folk, seal-hunters. Builders in wood. A half-dozen or so tribes. There was someone called the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag, who waged a war of subjugation – why he didn't end up with that dreadful sword only the Edur know and it is not something they talk about.'

'Does this Hannan Mosag still live?' Tavore asked.

'The Emperor's new Ceda.'

Deadsmell's snores ceased. 'Imperial High Mage,' he said. 'Ceda, a degradation of "Cedance", I'd wager. "Cedance" was some sort of ritual back in the days of the First Empire.' His eyes opened halfway. 'Ebron won't be at all surprised. These Letherii are some lost colony of the First Empire.' The heavy lids slid down once more, and a moment later his snores groaned back to life.

Shurq Elalle thought to clear her throat, changed her mind. Things were rank enough as it was. 'The point I was making, Adjunct, is that the Tiste Edur couldn't administer their way through a mooring tithe. They're warriors and hunters – the males, that is. The females are, as far as I can tell, completely useless mystics of some sort, and since the conquest they've virtually disappeared from sight.'

Boots echoed from the corridor and moments later the door opened. Accompanied by Galt and the odd little man named Widdershins, two Letherii soldiers strode into the chamber. One of them was an Atri-Preda.

Shake Brullyg lurched back in his chair, almost toppling it. Face twisting, he rose. 'Damn every damned witch to the deep!'

'It gets worse,' the Atri-Preda replied with a faint smile on her lips. 'I choose my own Rise, and you are not him. Yedan, throw this fool out on his arse – any window will do.'

Sudden alarm in Brullyg's eyes as he stared at the soldier at the captain's side, who made to move forward.

Galt's sword was out of its scabbard in a blur, settled flat against the soldier's stomach, halting the man in his tracks. 'Maybe we should all back

this up a few steps,' he said in a drawl. 'Adjunct, allow me to present Atri-Preda Yan Tovis and Shore Watch Yedan Derryg – which I take it is some kind of sergeant in charge of some kind of coastal patrol. What's "Atri-Preda"? Captain? Commander? Whatever, they was in charge of that half-drowned bunch the Perish plucked from the storm.'

The Adjunct was frowning at Yan Tovis. 'Atri-Preda, welcome. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran of the Malazan Empire—'

Yan Tovis glanced across at her. 'You're commanding this invasion? How many soldiers did you land on the coast, Adjunct? Ten thousand? Twenty? I saw the ships, the burning ships – you followed our fleets all the way from your empire? That's a long way for a little vengeful bloodletting, isn't it?'

Shurq dreamed of downing another tankard of wine. At least the Malazans weren't looking her way any more.

The Adjunct's frown deepened, accentuating her drab plainness. 'If you wish,' she said coolly, 'we can formalize your status as prisoners of war. Yet I find it difficult to characterize your sinking ferry as a punitive invasion expedition. According to the reports I have received, your status is better likened as refugees, yes? A modest company of soldiers overseeing a sizeable collection of old men and women, children and other non-combatants. Were you sailing here assuming the island remained independent?' She flicked her gaze across to Brullyg, who stood leaning against the far wall. 'That you and Shake Brullyg are acquainted suggests you are here to resolve some private matter between you.'

Yan Tovis's eyes were flat as she shrugged and said, 'Hardly private. "Shake" is a tribe's name and could, if desired, precede the names of myself and Yedan here, as well as our "collection" of "refugees". The Shake were the original inhabitants of the central west coast and some of the islands off shore. We were long ago subjugated by the Letherii.' She shrugged again. 'My issue with Brullyg refers to a matter of succession.'

Tavore's brows rose. 'Succession? You retain such things even when subjugated?'

'More or less. The line is maintained through the women. The Queen – my mother – has recently died. It was Brullyg's hope that I not return to claim the title. Brullyg wanted to rule the Shake for himself. He also wanted, I suspect, to make some bold claim to independence, riding the wave of your invasion – assuming it proves successful. Casting off the Letherii yoke and creating a new centre for our people, on this once-holy island. Although a murderer and a betrayer, Brullyg is an ambitious creature. Alas, his rule on this island has come to an end.'

Throatslitter hissed laughter. 'Hear that, Masan Gilani? You can stop showing all that sweet flesh now.'

'I am not sure,' the Adjunct said, 'the decision is yours to make, Atri-Preda.'

'That rank is now gone. You may address me as Queen or, if you like, as Twilight.'

Shurq Elalle saw Deadsmell's eyes flick open then, saw them fix hard and unblinking on Yan Tovis.

The Adjunct missed nothing, for she glanced at Deadsmell for a moment, then away again.

'Twilight, Watch and Rise,' Deadsmell muttered. 'Covered the whole night, haven't ya? But damn me, the blood's awful thin. Your skin's the colour of clay – couldn't have been more than a handful at the start, probably refugees hiding among the local savages. A pathetic handful, but the old titles remained. Guarding the Shores of Night.'

Yan Tovis licked her lips. 'Just the Shore,' she said.

Deadsmell smiled. 'Lost the rest, did you?'

'Corporal,' Tavore said.

'Our squad spent time on the right ship,' Deadsmell explained. 'Enough for me to do plenty of talking with our black-skinned guests. Twilight,' he said to Yan Tovis, 'that's a Letherii word you use. Would you be surprised if I told you the word for "twilight", in your original language, was

"yenander"? And that "antovis" meant "night" or even "dark"? Your own name is your title, and I can see by your expression that you didn't even know it. Yedan Derryg? Not sure what "derryg" is – we'll need to ask Sandalath – but "yedanas" is "watch", both act and title. Gods below, what wave was that? The very first? And why the Shore? Because that's where newborn K'Chain Che'Malle came from, isn't it? The ones not claimed by a Matron, that is.' His hard eyes held on Yan Tovis a moment longer, then he settled back once more and closed his eyes.

*Errant fend, is he going to do that all evening?*

'I do not know what he is talking about,' Yan Tovis said, but it was clear that she had been rattled. 'You are all foreigners – what can you know of the Shake? We are barely worth mentioning even in Letherii history.'

'Twilight,' said Tavore, 'you are here to assert your title as Queen – will you also proclaim this island sovereign?'

'Yes.'

'And, in that capacity, do you seek to treat with us?'

'The sooner I can negotiate you Malazans off this island, the happier I will be. And you, as well.'

'Why is that?'

The mage named Widdershins spoke up, 'Those refugees of hers, Adjunct. One big squall of witches and warlocks. Oh, squiggily stuff for the most part – fouling water and cursin' us with the runs and boils and the like. Mind, they could get together and work nastier rituals . . .'

Shurq Elalle stared at the strange man. *Squiggily?*

'Yes,' said Yan Tovis. 'They could become troublesome.'

Galt grunted. 'So saving all their lives don't count for nothing?'

'It does, of course. But, like all things, even gratitude wanes in time, soldier. Especially when the deed hangs over us like an executioner's axe.'

Galt's scowl deepened, then he prodded Yedan Derryg with his sword. 'I need to keep this here?' he asked.

The bearded, helmed soldier seemed to chew on his reply before answering, 'That is for my Queen to decide.'

'Belay my last order,' Yan Tovis said. 'We can deal with Brullyg later.'

'Like demon-spawn you will!' Brullyg drew himself up. 'Adjunct Tavore Paran, I hereby seek your protection. Since I have co-operated with you from the very start, the least you can do is keep me alive. Sail me to the mainland if that suits. I don't care where I end up – just not in that woman's clutches.'

Shurq Elalle smiled at the fool. *Only everything you don't deserve, Brullyg. Mercy? In the Errant's fart, that's where you'll find that.*

Tavore's voice was suddenly cold. 'Shake Brullyg, your assistance is duly noted, and you have our gratitude, although I do seem to recall something about this island's imminent destruction beneath a sea of ice – which we prevented and continue to prevent. It may please the Queen that we do not intend to remain here much longer.'

Brullyg paled. 'But what about that ice?' he demanded. 'If you leave—'

'As the season warms,' Tavore said, 'the threat diminishes. Literally.'

'So what holds you here?' Yan Tovis demanded.

'We seek a pilot to the Lether River. And Letheras.'

Silence again. Shurq Elalle, who had been gleefully observing Brullyg's emotional dissolution, slowly frowned. Then looked round. All eyes were fixed on her. What had the Adjunct just said? Oh. The Lether River and Letheras.

*And a pilot to guide their invasion fleet.*

'What's that smell?' Widdershins suddenly asked.

Shurq scowled. 'The Errant's fart, is my guess.'

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The view thus accorded was a vista to answer my last day in the mortal world. The march down of hewn stones, menhirs and rygoliths showed in these unrelieved shadows the array of stolid faces, the underworld grimaces and hisses, bared teeth to threaten, the infinite rows of rooted gods and spirits stretching down the slope, across hill after hill, all the way, yes, to the limitless beyond sight, beyond the mirror of these misshapen, squinting eyes. And in these stalwart belligerents, who each in their day of eminence reached out clawed, grasping hands, the crimson touch of faith in all its demands on our time, our lives, our loves and our fears, were naught but mystery now, all recognition forgotten, abandoned to the crawl of remorseless change. Did their lost voices ride this forlorn wind? Did I tremble to the echo of blood beseechings, the tearing of young virgin flesh and the wonder of an exposed heart, the bemused last beats of insistent outrage? Did I fall to my knees before this ghastly succession of holy tyranny, as might any ignorant cowerer in crowded shadows?

The armies of the faithful were gone.

They marched away in lifted waves of dust and ash. Priests and priestesses, the succumbers to hope who conveyed their convictions with the desperate thirst of demons hoarding fearful souls in their private meanings of wealth, they remained couched in the cracks of their idols, bits of crumbling bone lodged in the stone's weaknesses, that and nothing more.

The view thus accorded, is the historian's curse. Lessons endless on the pointlessness of games of intellect, emotion and faith.

> The only worthwhile historians, I say, are those who conclude their lives in succinct acts of suicide.
>
> *Sixth Note, Volume II*
> *Collected Suicide Notes*
> Historian Brevos (the Indecisive)

His mother had loved his hands. A musician's hands. A sculptor's hands. An artist's hands. Alas, they had belonged on someone else, for Chancellor Triban Gnol was without such talents. Yet his fondness for his hands, tainted as it might be by the mockery of a physical gift without suitable expression, had grown over the years. They had, in a sense, become his own works of art. When lost in thought, he would watch them, their sinuous movements filled with grace and elegance. No artist could capture the true beauty of these pointless instruments, and although there was darkness to such appreciation, he had long since made peace with that.

Yet now, the perfection was gone. The healers had done what they could, but Triban Gnol could see the misshapen marring of once-flawless lines. He could still hear the snap of his finger bones, the betrayal of all that his mother had loved, had worshipped in their secret ways.

His father, of course, would have laughed. A sour grunt of a laugh. Well, not his true father, anyway. Simply the man who had ruled the household with thick-skulled murky cruelty. He had known that his wife's cherished son was not his own. His hands were thick and clumsy – all the more viciously ironic in that artistic talent resided within those bludgeon tools. No, Triban Gnol's once-perfect hands had come from his mother's lover, the young (so young, then) consort, Turudal Brizad, a man who was anything but what he seemed to be. Anything, yes, and nothing as well.

She would have approved, he knew, of her son's finding in the consort – his father – a perfect lover.

Such were the sordid vagaries of palace life in King Ezgara Diskanar's cherished kingdom, all of which seemed aged now, exhausted, bitter as ashes in Triban Gnol's mouth. The consort was gone, yet not gone. Touch

withdrawn, probably for ever now, a consort whose existence had become as ephemeral as his timeless beauty.

Ephemeral, yes. As with all things that these hands had once held; as with all things that had passed through these long, slim fingers. He knew he was feeling sorry for himself. An old man, beyond all hopes of attraction for anyone. Ghosts crowded him, the array of stained hues that had once painted his cherished works of art, layer upon layer – oh, the only time they had been truly soaked in blood had been the night he had murdered his father. All the others had died somewhat removed from such direct effort. A host of lovers who had betrayed him in some way or other, often in the simple but terrible crime of not loving him enough. And now, like a crooked ancient, he took children to his bed, gagging them to silence their cries. Using them up. Watching his hands do their work, the failed and ever-failing artist in pursuit of some kind of perfection, yet destroying all that he touched.

The crowding ghosts were accusation enough. They did not need to whisper in his skull.

Triban Gnol watched his hands as he sat behind his desk, watched their hunt for beauty and perfection, lost now and for ever more. *He broke my fingers. I can still hear—*

'Chancellor?'

He looked up, studied Sirryn, his newly favoured agent in the palace. Yes, the man was ideal. Stupid and unimaginative, he had probably tormented weaker children outside the tutor's classroom, to compensate for the fog in his head that made every attempt at learning a pointless waste of time. A creature eager for faith, suckling at someone's tit as if begging to be convinced that anything – absolutely anything – could taste like nectar.

'It draws close to the eighth bell, sir.'

'Yes.'

'The Emperor—'

'Tell me nothing of the Emperor, Sirryn. I do not need your observations on the Emperor.'

'Of course. My apologies, Chancellor.'

He would see these hands before him painted crimson again, he now knew. In a most literal fashion. 'Have you found Bruthen Trana?'

Sirryn's gaze flickered, then fell to the floor. 'No. He has truly vanished, sir.'

'Hannan Mosag sent him away,' Triban Gnol said, musing. 'Back up to the Edur homeland, I suspect. To dig in the middens.'

'The middens, sir?'

'Heaps of garbage, Sirryn.'

'But – why—'

'Hannan Mosag did not approve of Bruthen's precipitous stupidity. The fool very nearly launched a palace bloodbath. At the very least, sent away or not, Bruthen Trana has made it plain to all that such a bloodbath is imminent.'

'But the Emperor cannot be killed. There can be no—'

'That means nothing. It never has. I rule this empire. Besides, there is now a champion . . .' Triban Gnol fell silent, then shook his head and slowly rose. 'Come, Sirryn, it is time to tell the Emperor of the war we are now in.'

Outside in the corridor waited seven Letherii mages, called in from the four armies massing just west of Letheras. The Chancellor experienced a moment of regret that Kuru Qan was gone. And Enedictal and Nekal Bara, mages of impressive prowess. These new ones were but pale shadows, mostly supplanted by Hannan Mosag's Cedance of Tiste Edur. Yet they would be needed, because there weren't enough K'risnan left. And soon, the Chancellor suspected as he set out for the throne room, the others falling in behind him, soon there would be still fewer K'risnan.

The foreign enemy was deadly. They killed mages as a matter of course. Using explosive incendiaries, grenados. Able to somehow hide from the sorcery seeking them, they sprang deadly ambushes that rarely left behind a corpse of their own.

But the most important detail was one that Triban Gnol would keep from the Emperor. These foreigners were making a point of killing Tiste Edur. So, although Letherii soldiers were assembling to march west against the invaders, the Chancellor had prepared secret instructions to the commanders. He could see a way through all of this. *For the Letherii, that is.*

'Have you readied your gear, Sirryn?' he asked as they approached the throne room doors.

'Yes,' the soldier said bemusedly.

'I need someone I can rely on with the armies, Sirryn, and that someone is you.'

'Yes, Chancellor!'

*Just convey my words to the letter, idiot.* 'Fail me, Sirryn, and do not bother coming back.'

'Understood, sir.'

'Get the doors.'

Sirryn rushed ahead.

Inside the throne room was an unexpected, unwelcome surprise. Crouched in a desultory heap of twisted bone and mangled flesh was Hannan Mosag and four of his K'risnan.

As emblems of the foul sorcery feeding these Edur, there could be no better image to burn its bitter way into the Chancellor's brain. His father would have appreciated the scene, would indeed have gathered huge chunks of marble from which he would hack out life-sized likenesses, as if in mimicking reality he could somehow discover what lay beneath it, the

turgid currents of soul. A waste of time, as far as Triban Gnol was concerned. Besides, some things should never be revealed.

Hannan Mosag's deformed face seemed to leer at the Chancellor as he strode past the Ceda and his four Tiste Edur warlocks, but there was fear in the Ceda's eyes.

Sword-tip skittering on the cracked, scarred and gouged tiles, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths shifted uneasily on his throne. 'Chancellor,' Rhulad rasped, 'how good of you to come. And Letherii mages, a most impressive if useless gathering.'

Triban Gnol bowed, then said, 'Allied with Hannan Mosag's formidable Cedance, sire, our sorcerous prowess should be more than sufficient to rid ourselves of these foreign interlopers.'

Coins clicked on Rhulad's face as he grimaced. 'And the mages of the Borthen Brigade, were they sufficient? What of the Brigade itself, Chancellor? They have been mauled! Letherii mages, Letherii soldiers! Tiste Edur! Your foreign interlopers are carving through a damned army!'

'Unanticipated,' Triban Gnol murmured, eyes downcast, 'that the imperial fleets in their search for champions should have so riled a distant empire. As to that empire's belligerence, well, it seems almost unmatched; indeed, virtually insane, given the distances spanned to prosecute vengeance. Odd, as well, that no formal declaration of war was received – although, of course, it is doubtful our fleets ventured the same preceding the slaughter of that empire's citizens. Perhaps,' he added, glancing up, 'negotiation remains possible. Some form of financial compensation, should we prove able to arrange a truce—'

Hacking laughter from Hannan Mosag. 'You provincial fool, Gnol. Would that you were even capable of expanding that puny, melodramatic theatre of your mind, then mayhap humility would still that flapping tongue of yours.'

Brows raised, the Chancellor half turned to regard the Ceda. 'And what secret knowledge of this enemy do you possess? And would you care to enlighten myself and your Emperor?'

'This is not punitive,' Hannan Mosag said. 'Although it might seem that way. Empires get their noses bloodied all the time, and there were enough clashes at sea to deliver the message that this Malazan Empire was not to be trifled with. Our fleets were sent scurrying from their waters – Hanradi Khalag was brutally honest in his assessment. Malazan mages are more than a match for us, and for the Letherii.'

'If not punitive,' Triban Gnol asked, 'then what?'

Hannan Mosag faced the Emperor. 'Sire, my answer is best reserved for you alone.'

Rhulad bared his teeth. 'I am not deceived by your games, Ceda. Speak.'

'Sire—'

'Answer him!'

'I must not!'

Silence, in which Triban Gnol could hear naught but his own heart, thudding hard against his ribs. Hannan Mosag had made a terrible mistake here, victim of his own self-importance. Seeking to use this information of his as a means to crawl back to the Emperor's side. But the effort . . . *so clumsy!*

'Tell me,' Rhulad said in a whisper, 'why this must be our secret.'

'Sire, this matter belongs among the Tiste Edur.'

'Why?'

*Ah. Because, dear Emperor, these Malazans, they are coming for you.* Triban Gnol cleared his throat and clasped his hands together above his robe's belt. 'This is unnecessary,' he said in his smoothest voice. 'I am not so provincial as Hannan Mosag would like to believe. Emperor, your fleets set out across the world in search of champions, and so indeed they have gathered the best, most capable fighters from a host of peoples. What they could not have anticipated is that an entire *empire* would proclaim itself a champion. And set itself against you, sire. Our reports have made it clear,' he added, 'that the enemy is converging on Letheras, on this very city.' He

regarded Hannan Mosag as he added, 'They are – and yes, Ceda, I see the truth plain on your face – they are coming for the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. Alas, I do not expect they will elect to challenge him one soldier at a time.'

Rhulad seemed to have shrunk back into the throne. His red-shot eyes were wide with terror. 'They must be stopped,' he said in a trembling hiss. 'You will stop them. You, Hannan Mosag! And you, Chancellor! Our armies must stop them!'

'And so we shall,' Triban Gnol said, bowing again, before straightening and glancing across at the Ceda. 'Hannan Mosag, for all of our . . . disputes, do not for a moment fear that we Letherii will abandon our Emperor to these foreign dogs. We must unite, you and I, and bring all that we have together, and so annihilate these Malazans. Such audacity must be punished, thoroughly. Truly united, the Tiste Edur and the Letherii cannot be defeated.'

'Yes,' said Rhulad. 'That is true. Array the armies in an unbroken line outside the city – it is clear, isn't it, that they do not have the numbers to challenge such a thing?'

'Sire,' Triban Gnol ventured, 'perhaps it would be best to advance a little distance nonetheless. Westward. In that way we can, if need be, assemble our reserves in case there is a breach. Two lines of defence, sire, to make certain.'

'Yes,' Rhulad said, 'those tactics are sound. How far away are these Malazans? How long do we have?'

'Weeks,' Triban Gnol said.

'Good. That is well. Yes, we must do that. All of that, as you say. Ceda! You will second yourself and your K'risnan to the Chancellor—'

'Sire, he is no military commander—'

'Quiet! You have heard my will, Hannan Mosag. Defy me again and I will have you flailed.'

Hannan Mosag did not quail at the threat. Why would he in that destroyed body? Clearly, the Ceda, once Warlock King, was familiar with agony; indeed, at times it seemed the deadly magic that poured through him transformed pain into ecstasy, lighting Hannan Mosag's eyes with fervent fire.

Triban Gnol said to the Emperor, 'Sire, we shall protect you.' He hesitated, just long enough, then half raised a hand as if struck by a sudden thought. 'Emperor, I wonder, perhaps it would be best to begin the Challenges? Soon? Their presence is a distraction, an irritant for my guards. There have been incidents of violence, a growing impatience.' He paused again, two heartbeats, then said in a lower tone: 'Speculation, sire, that you fear to face them . . .'

Hannan Mosag's sneer produced a bestial growl. 'You pathetic creature, Gnol—'

'Not another word, Ceda!' Rhulad hissed. Spasms rippled across the Emperor's mottled face. The sword skittered again.

*Yes, Rhulad, you understand what it is to fear death more than any of us. Perhaps more than any mortal creature this world has seen. But you flinch not from some vague notion of oblivion, do you? No, for you, dear Emperor, death is something different. Never an end, only that which precedes yet another pain-filled rebirth. Even in death you cannot lose yourself, cannot escape – does anyone else here, apart from me, truly grasp the sheer horror of that?*

'The Challenges,' said the Emperor, 'will begin in four days. Chancellor, have your assessors agreed on an order?'

'Yes, sire. Three of the least skilled to begin. It is likely you will kill all three in a single day. They will tax you, of that we can be sure, but not unduly so. The second day is reserved for one champion. A masked woman. Exceptional speed but perhaps lacking imagination. Yet she will be difficult.'

'Good.'

'Sire . . .'

'Yes? What is it?'

'There are the two we have spoken of before. The Tarthenal with the flint sword. Undefeated by any other champion – in fact, no-one dares spar with him any more. He has the habit of breaking bones.'

'Yes. The arrogant one.' Rhulad smiled. 'But I have faced Tarthenal before.'

'But not one with Karsa Orlong's prowess, sire.'

'No matter, that.'

'He may succeed in killing you, sire. Perhaps more than once. Not seven. Such days are long past. But, perhaps, three or four. We have allotted three days.'

'Following the masked woman?'

'No, there are six others to span two days.'

Hannan Mosag was staring at the Chancellor now. 'Three days for this Tarthenal? No champion has yet been accorded *three* days.'

'Nonetheless, my assessors were unanimous, Ceda. This one is . . . unique.'

Rhulad was trembling once more. Slain by Karsa Orlong three, four times. *Yes, sire, the sheer horror of that . . .*

'There remains one more,' the Emperor said.

'Yes. The one named Icarium. He will be the last. If not the eighth day, then the ninth.'

'And the number of days with him, Chancellor?'

'Unknown, sire. He does not spar.'

'Then how do we know he can fight?'

Triban Gnol bowed again. 'Sire, we have discussed this before. The report of Varat Taun, corroborated by Icarium's companion, Taralack Veed. And now, I learned today, something new. Something most extraordinary.'

'What? Tell me!'

'Among the rejected champions, sire, a monk from a distant archipelago. It would appear, sire, that this monk – and indeed all of his people – worship a single god. And this god is none other than Icarium.'

Rhulad flinched as if struck across the face. The sword's point leapt up from the floor, then cracked down again. Marble chips clattered down the dais step. 'I am to cross blades with a *god*?'

The Chancellor shrugged. 'Do such claims hold veracity, sire? A primitive, ignorant people, these Cabalhii. No doubt seeing in dhenrabi the soul of sea-storms and in crab carapaces the faces of the drowned. I should add, Emperor, that this monk believes his god to be insane, to which the only answer is a painted mask denoting laughter. Savages possess the strangest notions.'

'A god . . .'

Triban Gnol risked a glance at Hannan Mosag. The Warlock King's expression was closed as he studied Rhulad. Something about that awakened a worm of unease in the Chancellor's gut.

'I shall slay a god . . .'

'There is no reason to believe otherwise,' Triban Gnol said in a calm, confident voice. 'It will serve timely, sire, in pronouncing your own godhood.'

Rhulad's eyes widened.

'Immortality,' the Chancellor murmured, 'already well established. Worshipped? Oh yes, by every citizen of this empire. Too modest, oh yes, to make the pronouncement of what is obvious to us all. But, when you stand over Icarium's destroyed corpse, well, that will be pronouncement enough, I should imagine.'

'Godhood. A god.'

'Yes, sire. Most assuredly. I have instructed the guild of sculptors, and their finest artists have already begun work. We shall announce the end of the Challenge in a most appropriate, a most glorious, manner.'

'You are wise indeed,' Rhulad said, slowly leaning back. 'Yes, wise.'

Triban Gnol bowed, ignoring the sour grunt from Hannan Mosag. *Oh, Ceda, you are mine now, and I shall use you. You and your foul Edur. Oh yes.* His eyes focused on his hands, folded so serenely where they rested on the clasp of his belt. 'Sire, orders must be delivered to our armies. The Ceda and I must discuss the disposition of mages and K'risnan.'

'Yes, of course. Leave me, all of you. Attend to your tasks.'

Gesturing behind him, Triban Gnol backed away, head still lowered, eyes now on the floor with its chips of marble and streaks of dust.

He could hear Hannan Mosag and his collection of freaks dragging their way towards the doors, like gigantic migrating toads. The simile brought a faint smile to his lips.

Out in the corridor, the doors shutting behind them, Triban Gnol turned to study Hannan Mosag. But the Ceda was continuing on, toads crowding his wake.

'Hannan Mosag,' the Chancellor called out. 'You and I have—'

'Save your crap for Rhulad,' the Ceda snapped.

'He will be displeased to hear of your lack of co-operation.'

'Flap away with that tongue of yours, Gnol. The displeasures yet to come will overwhelm your pathetic bleatings, I am sure.'

'What do you mean?'

But Hannan Mosag did not answer.

Triban Gnol watched as they plunged into a side passage and were gone from sight. *Yes, I will deal with you, Ceda, with great satisfaction.* 'Sirryn,

assemble your entourage in the compound and be on your way within the bell. And take these mages with you.'

'Yes sir.'

The Chancellor remained where he was until they too were gone, then he set off for his office, well pleased. That worm of unease was, however, reluctant to cease its gnawing deep inside him. He would have to think on that – too dangerous to just ignore such instincts, after all. But not right now. It was important to reward oneself, promptly, and so he released that flow of satisfaction. Everything was proceeding nicely – that detail about the Emperor himself being the final target of these foreigners simply sweetened the scenario. The Tiste Edur would of course stand to defend their Emperor – *they would, certainly*.

*Yet, Rhulad's own brothers, the day of the accession.* The worm writhed, forcing a twitch to his face, and he quickened his pace, eager for the sanctuary of his office.

Only to discover it occupied.

Triban Gnol stood in the doorway, surprised and discomfited by the sight of the man standing to one side of the huge desk. The crimson silks, the onyx rings, that damned sceptre of office tapping rhythmically on one rounded shoulder. 'What in the Errant's name are you doing here, Invigilator?'

Karos Invictad sighed. 'I share your displeasure, Chancellor.'

Triban Gnol entered the room, walked round his desk and sat. 'I am in the habit of assuming that your control of the city is well in hand—'

'Where is Bruthen Trana?'

The Chancellor pursed his lips. 'I haven't the time for this. Put your panic to rest – Bruthen Trana is no longer in Letheras.'

'Then where has he gone? What road? How long ago? What is the size of his escort?'

Sighing, Triban Gnol leaned back, eyes settling on his hands where they rested palms down on the desktop. 'Your need for vengeance, Invigilator, is compromising your responsibilities in maintaining order. You must step back, draw a few deep breaths—'

The sceptre cracked down on the desktop, directly between the Chancellor's hands. Triban Gnol lurched back in alarm.

Karos Invictad leaned far forward, seeking an imposing, threatening posture that, alas, failed. The man was, simply put, too small. Sweat glistened on his brow, beads glinting from his nose and to either side of that too-full mouth. 'You patronizing piece of shit,' the Invigilator whispered. 'I was given leave to hunt down Tiste Edur. I was given leave to make arrests. I wanted that K'risnan who accompanied Bruthen Trana, only to find him beyond my reach because of Hannan Mosag and this damned invasion from the west. Fine. He can wait until the trouble passes. But Bruthen Trana . . . no, I will not put that aside. I want him. *I want him!* '

'He has been whisked away, Invigilator, and no, we have no information on when, or which road or ship he set out on. He is gone. Will he return? I imagine he will, and when that time comes, of course he is yours. In the meantime, Karos, we are faced with far more important concerns. I have four armies massing west of the city for which wages are now two weeks overdue. Why? Because the treasury is experiencing a shortage of coin. Even as you and your favourite agents line the walls of your new estates with stolen loot, even as you assume control of one confiscated enterprise after another. Tell me, Invigilator, how fares the treasury of the Patriotists these days? Minus the loot?' The Chancellor then rose from his chair, making full use of his superior height and seeing with grim pleasure the small man step back. It was now Triban Gnol's turn to lean across the desk. 'We have a crisis! The threat of financial ruin looms over us all – and you stand here fretting over one Tiste Edur barbarian!' He made a show of struggling to master his fury, then added, 'I have received increasingly desperate missives from the Liberty Consign, from Rautos Hivanar himself – the wealthiest man in the empire. Missives, Invigilator, imploring me to summon you – so be it, here you are, and you *will* answer my questions!

And if those answers do not satisfy me, I assure you they will not satisfy Rautos Hivanar!'

Karos Invictad sneered. 'Hivanar. The old fool has gone senile. Obsessing over a handful of artifacts dug up from the river bank. Have you seen him of late? He has lost so much weight his skin hangs like drapery on his bones.'

'Perhaps you are the source of his stress, Invigilator—'

'Hardly.'

'Rautos has indicated you have been . . . excessive, in your use of his resources. He begins to suspect you are using his coin for the payroll of the entire Patriotist organization.'

'I am and will continue to do so. In pursuit of the conspirators.' Karos smiled. 'Chancellor, your opinion that Rautos Hivanar is the wealthiest man in the empire is, alas, in error. At least, if it was once so, it is no longer.'

Triban Gnol stared at the man. At his flushed, triumphant expression. 'Explain yourself, Karos Invictad.'

'At the beginning of this investigation, Chancellor, I perceived the essential weakness in our position. Rautos Hivanar himself. As leader of the Liberty Consign. And, by extension, the Consign itself was, as an organization, inherently flawed. We were faced with a looming collision, one that I could not will myself blind to, and accordingly it was incumbent on me to rectify the situation as quickly as possible. You see, the power lay with me, but the wealth resided in the clutches of Hivanar and his Consign. This was unacceptable. In order to meet the threat of the conspirators – or, as I now see, conspirator – yes, there is but one – in order to meet his threat, I needed to attack from a consolidated position.'

Triban Gnol stared, disbelieving even as he began to comprehend the direction of the Invigilator's pompous, megalomaniacal monologue.

'The sweetest irony is,' Karos Invictad continued, sceptre once more tapping a beat on his shoulder, 'that lone criminal and his pathetically simplistic efforts at financial sabotage provided me with the greatest

inspiration. It was not difficult, for one of my intelligence, to advance and indeed to elaborate on that theme of seeming destabilization. Of course, the only people being destabilized were Rautos Hivanar and his fellow bloated blue-bloods, and was I supposed to be sympathetic? I, Karos Invictad, born to a family crushed by murderous debt? I, who struggled, using every talent I possessed to finally rid myself of that inherited misery – no,' he laughed softly, 'there was no sympathy in my heart. Only bright revelation, brilliant inspiration – do you know who was my greatest idol when I fought my war against Indebtedness? Tehol Beddict. Recall him? Who could not lose, whose wealth shot skyward with such stunning speed, achieving such extraordinary height, before flashing out like a spent star in the night sky. Oh, he liked his games, didn't he? Yet, a lesson there, and one I heeded well. Such genius, sparking too hot, too soon, left him a gutted shell. And that, Chancellor, I would not emulate.'

'You,' Triban Gnol said, 'are the true source of this empire-wide sabotage.'

'Who better positioned? Oh, I will grant you, my fellow conspirator has displayed increasingly impressive deviousness of late. And there is no doubt that I could not have achieved quite the level of success as I have without him or her. Triban Gnol, standing before you at this moment is the wealthiest man ever to have lived in Lether. Yes, appalling stacks of coin have indeed vanished. Yes, the strain has sent fatal fissures through every merchant house in the empire. And yes, many great families are about to fall and nothing can save them, even were I so inclined. Which I am not. Thus.' The sceptre settled motionless onto that shoulder. 'I am both the power and the wealth, and I am poised to save this empire from financial ruin – should I so choose.'

The Chancellor's hands, there on the desktop, had gone white, the veins and arteries prominent in their sickly blue and green hues. The hands – his hands – felt cold as death. 'What do you want, Karos Invictad?'

'Oh, I mostly have it already, Chancellor. Including, I am pleased to see, your fullest understanding of the situation. As it stands now. As it will stand in the future.'

'You seem to forget there is a war on.'

'There always is. Opportunities for yet more profit and power. In the next week or two, Chancellor, I will become more famous, more beloved, more *powerful* than even you could imagine, or, should I say, *fear*.' His smile broadened. 'I assume it's fear, but relax, Chancellor, I do not have you next on my list. Your position is secure, and, once these damned Tiste Edur are taken care of, including the Emperor, it shall be you and I in control of this empire. No, you will see plain enough, as will everyone else. The saboteur arrested. The coins recovered. The invaders bought off. The Liberty Consign obliterated and the Patriotists dominant. You see, my agents will control the internal matters, while you will possess the armies – well-paid armies, I assure you – and absolute mastery of the palace.'

'What?' Triban Gnol asked dryly. 'You do not seek the throne for yourself?'

The sceptre waved dismissively. 'Not in the least. Throw a fop on it if you feel the need. Or better still, salute the legend and leave it empty.'

Triban Gnol folded his hands together. 'You are about to arrest your conspirator?'

'I am.'

'And my armies?'

'They will be paid. At once.'

The Chancellor nodded. 'Invigilator,' he then said, with a slight frown as he studied his hands, 'I have heard disturbing reports . . .'

'Oh?'

'Yes. It seems that, in a manner distressingly similar to Rautos Hivanar, you too have succumbed to a peculiar obsession.' He glanced up searchingly, innocently.

'Something about a puzzle?'

'Who has told you that?'

The Chancellor shrugged.

After a moment the flush in Invictad's round face faded to blotches on the cheeks, and the man shrugged. 'An idle pursuit. Amusing. A quaint challenge which I will solve in a few days. Unlike Rautos Hivanar, you see, I have found that this puzzle has in fact sharpened my mind. The world has never been clearer to my eyes. Never as clean, as precise, as perfect. That puzzle, Chancellor, has become my inspiration.'

'Indeed. Yet it haunts you – you cry out in your sleep—'

'Lies! Someone mocks you with such untruths, Triban Gnol! I have come here, have I not, to inform you of the impending triumph of my plans. Every detail coming to fullest fruition. This effort of yours now, pathetically transparent as it is, is entirely unnecessary. As I told you, your position is secure. You are, and will remain, entirely essential.'

'As you say, Invigilator.'

Karos Invictad turned to leave. 'As soon as you learn of Bruthen Trana's return . . .'

'You shall be informed at once.'

'Excellent. I am pleased.' He paused at the door but did not turn round. 'Regarding that K'risnan under the Ceda's protection . . .'

'I am sure something can be arranged.'

'I am doubly pleased, Chancellor. Now, fare you well.'

The door closed. The odious, insane creature was gone.

Odious and insane, yes, but . . . *now the wealthiest man in the empire.* He would have to play this carefully, very carefully indeed. *Yet Karos Invictad has revealed his own flaw. Too eager to gloat and too ready to give in to that eagerness. All too soon.*

*The Emperor of a Thousand Deaths remains on the throne.*

*A foreign army uninterested in negotiation approaches.*

*A champion who is a god will soon draw his sword.*

*Karos Invictad has the hands of a child. A vicious child, crooning as he watches them pull out the entrails of his still-alive pet cat. Or dog. Or abject prisoner in one of his cells. A child, yes, but one unleashed, free to do and be as he pleases.*

*By the Errant, children are such monsters.*

Tonight, the Chancellor realized, he would summon a child for himself. For his own pleasure. And he would destroy that child, as only an adult with beautiful hands could. Destroy it utterly.

It was the only thing one could do with monsters.

The one-eyed god standing unseen in the throne room was furious. Ignorance was ever the enemy, and the Errant understood that he was under assault. By Chancellor Triban Gnol. By Hannan Mosag. The clash of these two forces of the empire was something that the Emperor on his throne barely sensed – the Errant was sure of that. Rhulad was trapped in his own cage of emotions, terror wielding all its instruments of torture, poking, jabbing, twisting deep. Yet the Errant had witnessed with clear eyes – *no, a clear eye* – in the fraught audience now past, just how vicious this battle was becoming.

*But I cannot fathom their secrets. Neither Triban Gnol's nor Hannan Mosag's. This is my realm. Mine!*

He might renew one old path. The one leading into the Chancellor's bedroom. But even then, when that relationship had been in fullest bloom, Triban Gnol held to his secrets. Sinking into his various personas of innocent victim and wide-eyed child, he had become little more than a simpleton when with the Errant – with Turudal Brizad, the Consort to the Queen, who never grew old – and would not be moved from the games he so needed. *No, that would not work, because it never had.*

Was there any other way to the Chancellor?

Even now, Triban Gnol was a godless creature. Not one to bend knee to the Errant. So that path, too, was closed. *I could simply follow him. Everywhere. Piece together his scheme by listening to the orders he*

*delivers, by reading the missives he despatches. By hoping he talks in his sleep. Abyss below!*

Furious, indeed. At his own growing panic as the convergence drew ever closer. His knowledge was no better when it came to Hannan Mosag, although some details were beyond dissembling. The power of the Crippled God, for one. Yet even there, the Warlock King was no simple servant, no mindless slave to that chaotic promise. He had sought the sword now in Rhulad's hands, after all. As with any other god, the Fallen One played no favourites. First to arrive at the altar . . . No, Hannan Mosag would hold to no delusions there.

The Errant glanced once more at Rhulad, this Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. The fool, for all his bulk, now sat on that throne in painful insignificance – so obvious it hurt to just look at him. Alone in this vast domed chamber, the thousand deaths refracted into ten thousand flinches in those glittering eyes.

The Chancellor and his retinue were gone. The Ceda away with his broken handful as well. Not a guard in sight, yet Rhulad remained. Sitting, burnished coins gleaming. And on his face all that had been private, unrevealed, was now loosed in expressive array. All the pathos, the abject hauntings – the Errant had seen, had always seen, in face after face spanning too many years to count, the divide of the soul, the difference between the face that knew it was being watched, and the face that believed in its solitude. Bifurcation. And he had witnessed when inside crawled outside to a seemingly unseeing world.

*Divided soul. Yours, Rhulad, has been cut in two. By that sword, by the spilled blood between you and each of your brothers, between you and your parents. Between you and your kind. What would you give me, Rhulad Sengar of the Hiroth Tiste Edur, to be healed?*

*Assuming I could manage such a thing, of course. Which I cannot.*

But it was clear to the Errant now that Rhulad had begun to understand one thing at least. The fast approach of convergence, the dread gathering and inevitable clash of powers. Perhaps the Crippled God had been

whispering in his sword-bearer's ear. Or perhaps Rhulad was not quite the fool most believed him to be. *Even me, on occasion – and who am I to sneer in contempt? A damned Letherii witch swallowed one of my eyes!*

The growing fear was undisguised in the Emperor's face. Coins bedded in burnt skin. Mottled pocking where the coins were gone. Brutal wealth and wounded penury, two sides of yet another curse to plague this modern age. *Yes, divide humanity's soul. Into the haves, the have-nots. Rhulad, you are in truth a living symbol. But that is a weight no-one can bear for very long. You see the end coming. Or, many endings, and yes, one of them is yours.*

*Shall it be this foreign army that has, in Triban Gnol's clever words, proclaimed itself a champion?*

*Shall it be Icarium, Stealer of Life? The Wanderer through Time?*

*Or something far more sordid – some perfect ambush by Hannan Mosag; or one final betrayal to annihilate you utterly, as would one committed by your Chancellor?*

*And why do I believe the answer will be none of those? Not one. Not a single thing so . . . so direct. So obvious.*

*And when will this blood stop seeping from this socket? When will these crimson tears end?*

The Errant melted into the wall behind him. He'd had enough of Rhulad's private face. Too much, he suspected, like his own. *Imagined unwatched – but am I too being watched? Whose cold gaze is fixed on me, calculating meanings, measuring weaknesses?*

*Yes, see where I weep, see what I weep.*

*And yes, this was all by a mortal's hand.*

He moved quickly, unmindful of barriers of mortar and stone, of tapestry and wardrobe, of tiled floors and ceiling beams. Through darkness and light and shadows in all their flavours, into the sunken tunnels, where he walked through ankle-deep water without parting its murky surface.

Into her cherished room.

She had brought stones to build platforms and walkways, creating a series of bridges and islands over the shallow lake that now flooded the chamber. Oil lamps painted ripples and the Errant stood, taking form once more opposite the misshapen altar she had erected, its battered top crowded with bizarre votive offerings, items of binding and investiture, reliquaries assembled to give new shape to the god's worship. *To the worship of me.* The gnostic chthonic nightmare might have amused the Errant once, long ago. But now he could feel his face twisting in disdain.

She spoke from the gloomy corner to his left. 'Everything is perfect, Immortal One.'

Solitude and insanity, most natural bedmates. 'Nothing is perfect, Feather Witch. Look, all around you in this place – is it not obvious? We are in the throes of dissolution—'

'The river is high,' she said dismissively. 'A third of the tunnels I used to wander are now under water. But I saved all the old books and scrolls and tablets. I saved them all.'

Under water. Something about that disturbed him – not the obvious thing, the dissolution he had spoken of, but . . . something else.

'The names,' she said. 'To release. To bind. Oh, we shall have many servants, Immortal One. Many.'

'I have seen,' the god said, 'the fissures in the ice. The meltwater. The failing prison of that vast demon of the sea. We cannot hope to enslave such a creature. When it breaks free, there will be devastation. Unless, of course, the Jaghut returns – to effect repairs on her ritual. In any case – and fortunately for everyone – I do not believe that Mael will permit it to get even that far – to escape.'

'You must stop him!' Feather Witch said in a hiss.

'Why?'

'Because I want that demon!'

'I told you, we cannot hope to—'

'*I can!* I know the names! All of the names!'

He stared across at her. 'You seek an entire pantheon, Feather Witch? Is one god under your heel not enough?'

She laughed, and he heard something splash in the water near her. 'The sea remembers. In every wave, every current. The sea, Immortal One, remembers the shore.'

'What – what does that mean?'

Feather Witch laughed again. 'Everything is perfect. Tonight, I will visit Udinaas. In his dreams. By morning he will be mine. Ours.'

'This web you cast,' the Errant said, 'it is too thin, too weak. You have stretched it beyond all resilience, and it *will* snap, Feather Witch.'

'I know how to use your power,' she replied. 'Better than you do. Because us mortals understand certain things far better than you and your kind.'

'Such as?' the Errant asked, amused.

'The fact that worship is a weapon, for one.'

At those dry words, chill seeped through the god.

*Ah, poor Udinaas.*

'Now go,' she said. 'You know what must be done.'

Did he? *Well . . . yes. A nudge. What I do best.*

The sceptre cracked hard against the side of Tanal Yathvanar's head, exploding stars behind his eyes, and he staggered, then sank down onto one knee, as the blood began flowing. Above him, Karos Invictad said in a conversational tone: 'I advise you, next time you are tempted to inform on my activities to one of the Chancellor's agents, to reconsider. Because the next time, Tanal, I will see you killed. In a most unpleasant fashion.'

Tanal watched the blood fall in elongated droplets, spattering on the dusty floor. His temple throbbed, and his probing fingers found a flap of mangled skin hanging down almost to his cheek. His eye on that side ebbed in and

out of focus in time with the throbbing. He felt exposed, vulnerable. He felt like a child among cold-faced adults. 'Invigilator,' he said in a shaky voice, 'I have told no-one anything.'

'Lie again and I will dispense with mercy. Lie again and the breath you use to utter it will be your last.'

Tanal licked his lips. What could he do? 'I'm sorry, Invigilator. Never again. I swear it.'

'Get out, and send for a servant to clean up the mess you've left in my office.'

Nauseated, his throat tightening against an eager upswell of vomit, Tanal Yathvanar hurried out in a half-crouch.

*I've done nothing. Nothing to deserve this. Invictad's paranoia has driven him into the abyss of madness. Even as his power grows. Imagine, threatening to sweep away the Chancellor's own life, in Triban Gnol's own office!* Of course, that had been but the Invigilator's version of what had transpired. But Tanal had seen the bright gleam in Invictad's eyes, fresh from the glory of his visit to the Eternal Domicile.

It had all gone too far. All of it.

Head spinning, Tanal set out to find a healer. There was much still to do this day. An arrest to be made, and, split-open skull or no, Karos Invictad's precise schedule had to be kept. This was to be a triumphant day. For the Patriotists. For the great Letherii Empire.

It would ease the pressure, the ever-tightening straits that gripped the people – and not just here in Letheras, but across the entire empire. Too many fraught rumours, of battles and defeats suffered. The strictures of not enough hard coin, the strange disappearance of unskilled labour, the tales of once-secure families falling into Indebtedness. The whisper of huge financial holdings tottering like trees with rotted roots. Heroic victories were needed, and this day would mark one. Karos Invictad had found the greatest traitor ever, and he, Tanal Yathvanar, would make the arrest. *And*

*they will hear that detail. My name, central to all that will happen this day. I intend to make certain of it.*

Karos Invictad was not the only man skilled at reaping glory.

* * *

Ancient cities possessed many secrets. The average citizen was born, lived, and died in the fugue of vast ignorance. The Errant knew he had well learned his contempt for humanity, for the dross of mortal existence that called blindness vision, ignorance comprehension, and delusion faith. He had seen often enough the wilful truncation people undertook upon leaving childhood (and the wonder of its endless possibilities), as if to exist demanded the sacrifice of both unfettered dreams and the fearless ambition needed to achieve them. As if those self-imposed limitations used to justify failure were virtues, to add to those of pious self-righteousness and the condescension of the flagellant.

Oh, but look at himself, here and now, look at what he was about to do. The city's ancient secrets made into things to be used, and used to achieve cruel ends. Yet was he not a god? Was this not his realm? If all that existed was not open to use and, indeed, *abuse*, then what was its purpose?

He walked through the ghostly walls, the submerged levels, acknowledging a vague awareness of hidden, mostly obscured patterns, structures, the array of *things* that held significance, although such comprehension was not for him, not for his cast of mind, but something alien, something long lost to the dead ages of the distant past.

No end to manifestations, however, few of which captured the awareness of the mortals he now walked among – walked unseen, less than a chill draught against the neck – and the Errant continued on, observing such details as snared his attention.

Finding the place he sought, he halted. Before him stood the walls of an estate. None other than the one that had belonged to the late Gerun Eberict. It stood abandoned, ownership mired in a legal tangle of claims that had stretched on and on. Gerun Eberict had, it seemed, taken all his wealth with him, a detail that amused the Errant no end.

The huge main building's footprint cut across the unremarked lines of an older structure that had once stood bordered on three sides by open water: two cut channels and a stream born of deep artesian wells filled with cold black water beneath a vast shelf of limestone that itself lay below a thick layer of silts, sand lenses and beds of clay. There had been significance to these channels, and to the fact that the fourth side had possessed, beneath what passed for a street seven thousand years ago, a buried tunnel of fire-hardened clay. In this tunnel, kept distinct from all other local sources, there had flowed water from the depths of the river. Thus, all four sides, the precious lifeblood of the Elder God who had been worshipped in the temple that had once squatted in this place.

Eberict should have been mindful of that detail, in which a hired seer might well have discerned Gerun's eventual demise at the blunt hands of a half-breed giant. It was no accident, after all, that those of Tarthenal blood were so drawn to Mael, even now – some whispering of instinct of that first alliance, forged on the water, between Imass and Tarthenal – or Toblakai, to use their true name. Before the Great Landings that brought the last of the giants who had chosen to remain pure of blood to this and other shores, where the first founders would become the vicious, spiteful gods of the Tarthenal.

But it was not just Gerun Eberict and the countless other citizens of Letheras who dwelt here who were unmindful – or, perhaps, forgetful – of the ancient significance of all that had been swept clean from the surface in this city.

The Errant moved forward. Through the estate's outer wall. Then down, through the cobbles of the compound, sliding ghostly past the rubble and sand of fill, down into the foul, motionless air of the clay-lined tunnel. Knee-deep in thick, soupy water.

He faced the inner sloping wall of the tunnel, gauging his position relative to whatever remnants of the old temple remained beyond. And strode forward.

Shattered stone, jammed and packed tight, stained black by the thick, airless clays now filling every space. Evidence of fire in the burst cracks of

foundation blocks. Remnants of ore-laden paints still clinging to fragments of plaster. Ubiquitous pieces of pottery, shapeless clumps of green copper, the mangled black knuckles of silver, the defiant gleam of red-tinged gold – all that remained of past complexities of mortal life, reminders of hands that had once touched, shaped, pressed tips to indent and nails to incise, brushed glaze and paint and dust from chipped rims; hands that left nothing behind but these objects poignant with failure.

Disgusted, nauseated, the god pushed his way through the detritus, and clawed his way clear: a steeply angled space, created by the partially collapsed inner wall. Blue tesserae to paint an image of unbroken sea, but various pieces had fallen away, revealing grey plaster still bearing the grooved patterns left by the undersides of the minute cut tiles. In this cramped space the Errant crouched, gasping. Time told no bright tales. No, time delivered its mute message of dissolution with unrelieved monotony.

*By the Abyss, such crushing weight!*

The Errant drew a deep breath of the stale, dead air. Then another.

And sensed, not far away, the faint whisper of power. Residual, so meagre as to be meaningless, yet it started the god's heart pounding hard in his chest. The sanctification remained. No desecration, making what he sought that much simpler. Relieved at the thought of being quickly done with this ghastly place, the Errant set out towards that power.

The altar was beneath a mass of rubble, the limestone wreckage so packed down that it must have come from a collapsing ceiling, the huge weight slamming down hard enough to shatter the stones of the floor beneath that runnelled block of sacred stone. *Even better. And . . . yes, bone dry.* He could murmur a thousand nudges into that surrounding matrix. Ten thousand.

Edging closer, the Errant reached down and settled one hand on the altar. He could not feel those runnels, could not feel the water-worn basalt, could not feel the deep-cut channels that had once vented living blood into the salty streams filling the runnels. *Ah, we were thirsty in those days, weren't we?*

He awakened his own power – as much as she would give him, and for this task it was more than enough.

The Errant began weaving a ritual.

Advocate Sleem was a tall, thin man. Covering most of his forehead and spreading down onto his left cheek, reaching the line of the jaw, was a skin ailment that created a cracked scale pattern reminiscent of the bellies of newly hatched alligators. There were ointments that could heal this condition, but it was clear that the legendary advocate of Letherii law in fact cultivated this reptilian dermatosis, which so cleverly complemented both his reputation and his cold, lifeless eyes.

He stood now in Bugg's office, hunched at the shoulders as if to make himself even narrower, and the high collar of his dark green cloak flared out like a snake's hood behind his elongated, small-eared and hairless head. His regard was languid in that lifeless way of his as he studied Bugg. 'Did I hear you correctly?' the advocate asked in a voice that he tried hard to make sibilant, but which instead came out awkward and wavering. The effect, Bugg realized with a faint start, precisely matched what he would imagine a snake would sound like with words emerging from a lipless mouth. Although, he added to himself, the specific question hardly seemed one he would expect a snake to utter. *Snakes don't ask for clarification.*

*Do they?*

'You wear a most odd expression,' Sleem said after a moment. 'Did my inability to understand you leave you confused, Master Bugg?'

'Did you truly misunderstand?'

'That is why I sought reiteration.'

'Ah. Well, what did you think you heard?'

The eyes blinked. 'Have we truly uttered all these words to return to my original query?'

'I invite you to use some more, Sleem.'

'Rather than simply repeating yourself.'

'I hate repeating myself.'

Advocate Sleem, Bugg knew, despised discombobulation, although that was in all probability not even a word.

'Master Bugg, as you know, I despise discombobulation.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'You should be, since I charge by the word.'

'Both our words, or just yours?'

'It is a little late to ask that now, isn't it?' Sleem's folded hands did something sinuous and vaguely disreputable. 'You have instructed me, if I understand you correctly – and correct me if I am in error – you have instructed me, then, to approach your financier to request yet another loan with the stated intention to use it to pay a portion of the interest on the previous loan, which if I recall accurately, and I do, was intended to address in part the interest on yet another loan. This leads me to wonder, since I am not your only advocate, just how many loans you have arranged to pay interest on yet other loans?'

'Well, that was expensive.'

'I become loquacious when I get nervous, Master Bugg.'

'Dealing with you gets more costly when you're nervous? That, Sleem, is really quite clever.'

'Yes, I am. Will you now answer my question?'

'Since you insist. There are perhaps forty loans outstanding with respect to addressing interest payments on still other loans.'

The advocate licked suitably dry lips. 'It was reasons of courtesy and respect, Master Bugg – and, I now see, certain misapprehensions as to your solvency – that encouraged me to refrain from asking for payment up front – for my services, that is, which have been substantial. Although not as substantial, proportionately, as I was led to believe.'

'I don't recall leading you into any such assumptions, Sleem.'

'Of course you don't. They were assumptions.'

'As an advocate, you might have been expected to make very few assumptions indeed. About anything.'

'Permit me to be blunt, Master Bugg. Where in this financial scheme of yours is the money you owe me?'

'Nowhere as of yet, Sleem. Perhaps we should arrange another loan.'

'This is most distressing.'

'I am sure it is, but how do you think I feel?'

'I am resisting asking myself that question, because I fear the answer will be something like: "He feels fine." Now, were I to cling with great faith to those particular assumptions we spoke of earlier, I would now insist that this next loan be devoted exclusively to addressing my fees. No matter what lies I deliver to your financier. Which returns us, alas, to my original utterance, which was voiced in a tone of abject disbelief. You see, your financiers' present state of panic is what has brought me here, for they have reached a level of harassment of my office with respect to you, Master Bugg, that has reached absurd proportions. I have had to hire bodyguards, in fact – at your expense. Dare I ask you then, how much money is in your possession?'

'Right now?'

'Yes.'

Bugg drew out his tattered leather purse, prised it open and peered inside. Then he looked up. 'Two docks.'

'I see. Surely you exaggerate.'

'Well, I cut a sliver off one of them, to pay for a haircut.'

'You have no hair.'

'That's why it was just a sliver. Nose hairs. Ear hairs, a trim of the eyebrows. It's important to be presentable.'

'At your Drowning?'

Bugg laughed. 'That would be fun.' Then he grew sober and leaned forward across his desk. 'You don't think it will come to that, surely. As your client, I expect a most diligent defence at my trial.'

'As your advocate, Master Bugg, I will be first in line demanding your blood.'

'Oh, that's not very loyal of you.'

'You have not paid for my loyalty.'

'But loyalty is not something one pays for, Advocate Sleem.'

'Had I known that delusions accompanied your now-apparent incompetence, Master Bugg, I would never have agreed to represent you in any matter whatsoever.'

Bugg leaned back. 'That makes no sense,' he said. 'As Tehol Beddict has observed on countless occasions, delusions lie at the very heart of our economic system. Indenture as ethical virtue. Pieces of otherwise useless metal – beyond decoration – as wealth. Servitude as freedom. Debt as ownership. And so on.'

'Ah, but those stated delusions are essential to my wellbeing, Master Bugg. Without them my profession would not exist. All of civilization is, in essence, a collection of contracts. Why, the very nature of society is founded upon mutually agreed measures of value.' He stopped then, and slowly shook his head – a motion alarmingly sinuous. 'Why am I even discussing this with you? You are clearly insane, and your insanity is about to trigger an avalanche of financial devastation.'

'I don't see why, Master Sleem. Unless, of course, your faith in the notion of social contract is nothing more than cynical self-interest.'

'Of course it is, you fool!'

So much for awkward sibilance.

Sleem's fingers wriggled like snared, blind and groping worms. 'Without cynicism,' he said in a strangled voice, 'one becomes the system's victim rather than its master, and I am too clever to be a victim!'

'Which you must prove to yourself repeatedly in the measuring by your wealth, your ease of life, of the necessary contrast with the victims – a contrast that you must surround yourself with at every moment, as represented by your material excesses.'

'Wordy, Master Bugg. Smug ostentation will suffice.'

'Brevity from you, Advocate Sleem?'

'You get what you pay for.'

'By that token,' Bugg observed, 'I am surprised you're saying anything at all.'

'What follows is my gift. I will set forth immediately to inform your financiers that you are in fact broke, and I will in turn offer my services in the feeding frenzy over your material assets.'

'Generous of you.'

Sleem's lips disappeared into a bony grimace. One eye twitched. The worms at the ends of his hands had gone white and deathly. 'In the meantime, I will take those two docks.'

'Not quite two.'

'Nonetheless.'

'I can owe you that missing sliver.'

'Be certain that I will have it, eventually.'

'All right.' Bugg reached into the purse and fished out the two coins. 'This is a loan, yes?'

'Against my fees?'

'Naturally.'

'I sense you are no longer playing the game, Master Bugg.'

'Which game would that be?'

'The one where winners win and losers lose.'

'Oh, that game. No, I suppose not. Assuming, of course, I ever did.'

'I have a sudden suspicion – this very real truth behind all the rumours of impending market collapse – it is all your doing, isn't it?'

'Hardly. Countless winners jumped in, I assure you. Believing, naturally, that they would win in the end. That's how these things work. Until they stop working.' Bugg snapped his fingers. 'Poof !'

'Without those contracts, Master Bugg, there will be chaos.'

'You mean the winners will panic and the losers will launch themselves into their own feeding frenzy. Yes. Chaos.'

'You are truly insane.'

'No, just tired. I've looked into the eyes of too many losers, Sleem. Far too many.'

'And your answer is to make losers of us all. To level the playing field? But it won't do that, you know. You must know that, Bugg. It won't. Instead, the thugs will find the top of every heap, and instead of debt you will have true slavery; instead of contracts you will have tyranny.'

'All the masks torn off, yes.'

'Where is the virtue in that?'

The Elder God shrugged. 'The perils of unfettered expansion, Advocate Sleem, are revealed in the dust and ashes left behind. Assume the species' immortality since it suits the game. Every game. But that assumption will not save you in the end. No, in fact, it will probably kill you. That one self-serving, pious, pretentious, arrogant assumption.'

'The bitter old man speaks.'

'You have no idea.'

'Would that I carried a knife. For I would kill you with it, here and now.'

'Yes. The game always ends at some point, doesn't it?'

'And you dare call me the cynical one.'

'Your cynicism lies in your willing abuse of others to consolidate your superiority over them. My cynicism is in regard to humanity's wilful blindness with respect to its own extinction.'

'Without that wilful blindness there is naught but despair.'

'Oh, I am not that cynical. In fact, I do not agree at all. Maybe when the wilful blindness runs its inevitable course, there will be born wilful wisdom, the revelation of seeing things as they are.'

'Things? To which things are you referring, old man?'

'Why, that everything of true value is, in fact, free.'

Sleem placed the coins in his own bulging purse and walked to the door. 'A very quaint notion. Alas, I will not wish you a good day.'

'Don't bother.'

Sleem turned at the hard edge in Bugg's voice. His brows lifted in curiosity.

Bugg smiled. 'The sentiment wouldn't be free now, would it?'

'No, it would not.'

As soon as the hapless advocate was gone, Bugg rose. *Well, it's begun. Almost to the day when Tehol said it would. The man's uncanny. And maybe in that, there lies some hope for humanity. All those things that cannot be measured, cannot be quantified in any way at all.*

*Maybe.*

Bugg would have to disappear now. Lest he get torn limb from limb by a murder of advocates, never mind the financiers. And that would be a most unpleasant experience. But first, he needed to warn Tehol.

The Elder God glanced around his office with something like affectionate regret, almost nostalgia. It had been fun, after all. This game. Like most games. He wondered why Tehol had stopped short the first time. But no, perhaps that wasn't at all baffling. Come face to face with a brutal truth – with any brutal truth – and it was understandable to back away.

*As Sleem said, there is no value in despair.*

*But plenty of despair in value, once the illusion is revealed. Ah, I am indeed tired.*

He set out from his office, to which he would never return.

'How can there be only four hens left? Yes, Ublala Pung, I am looking directly at you.'

'For the Errant's sake,' Janath sighed, 'leave the poor man alone. What did you expect to happen, Tehol? They're hens that no longer lay eggs, making them as scrawny and dry and useless as the gaggle of matronly scholars at my old school. What Ublala did was an act of profound bravery.'

'Eat my hens? Raw?'

'At least he plucked their feathers.'

'Were they dead by that point?'

'Let's not discuss those particular details, Tehol. Everyone is permitted one mistake.'

'My poor pets,' Tehol moaned, eyeing Ublala Pung's overstuffed pillow at one end of the reed mat that served as the half-blood Tarthenal's bed.

'They were not pets.'

He fixed a narrow gaze on his ex-tutor. 'I seem to recall you going on and on about the terrors of pragmatism, all through history. Yet what do I now hear from you, Janath? "They were not pets." A declarative statement uttered in most pragmatic tones. Why, as if by words alone you could cleanse what must have been an incident of brutal avian murder.'

'Ublala Pung has more stomachs than both you and me combined. They need filling, Tehol.'

'Oh?' He placed his hands on his hips – actually to make certain that the pin was holding the blanket in place, recalling with another pang his most public display a week past. 'Oh?' he asked again, and then added, 'And what, precisely and pragmatically, was wrong with my famous Grit Soup?'

'It was gritty.'

'Hinting of most subtle flavours as can only be cultivated from diligent collection of floor scrapings, especially a floor pranced upon by hungry hens.'

She stared up at him. 'You are not serious, are you? That really *was* grit from the floor? *This floor?* '

'Hardly reason for such a shocked expression, Janath. Of course,' he threw in offhandedly as he walked over to stand next to the blood-splotched pillow, 'creative cuisine demands a certain delicacy of the palate, a culture of appreciation—' He kicked at the pillow and it squawked.

Tehol spun round and glared at Ublala Pung, who sat, back to a wall, and now hung his head.

'I was saving one for later,' the giant mumbled.

'Plucked or unplucked?'

'Well, it's in there to stay warm.'

Tehol looked over at Janath and nodded, 'See? Do you see, Janath? Finally see?'

'See what?'

'The deadly slope of pragmatism, Mistress. The very proof of your arguments all those years ago. Ublala Pung's history of insensitive rationalizations – if you could call anything going on in that skull rational – leading him – and, dare I add, innumerable unsuspecting hens – into the inevitable, egregious extreme of . . . of abject nakedness inside a pillow!'

Her brows lifted. 'Well, that scene last week really scarred you, didn't it?'

'Don't be absurd, Janath.'

Ublala had stuck out his tongue – a huge, pebbled slab of meat – and was trying to study it, his eyes crossing with the effort.

'What are you doing now?' Tehol demanded.

The tongue retreated and Ublala blinked a few times to right his eyes. 'Got cut by a beak,' he said.

'You ate their beaks?'

'Easier to start with the head. They ain't so restless with no heads.'

'Really?'

Ublala Pung nodded.

'And I suppose you consider that merciful?'

'What?'

'Of course not,' Tehol snapped. 'It's just *pragmatic*. "Oh, I'm being eaten. But that's all right. I have no head!" '

Ublala frowned at him. 'Nobody's eating you, Tehol. And your head's still there – I can see it.'

'I was speaking for the hens.'

'But they don't speak Letherii.'

'You are not eating my last four hens.'

'What about the one in the pillow, Tehol? Do you want it back? Its feathers might grow back, though it might catch a cold or something. I can give it back if you like.'

'Generous of you, Ublala, but no. Put it out of its misery, but mind the beak. In the meantime, however, I think you need to get yourself organized – you were supposed to leave days ago, after all, weren't you?'

'I don't want to go to the islands,' Ublala said, dragging a chipped nail through the grit on the floor. 'I sent word. That's good enough, isn't it? I sent word.'

Tehol shrugged. 'If it's good enough, it's good enough. Right, Janath? By all means, stay with us, but you have to set out now to find food. For all of us. A hunting expedition and it won't be easy, Ublala. Not at all easy. There's not been a supply ship on the river for days now, and people have started hoarding things, as if some terrible disaster were imminent. So, as I said, Ublala, it won't be easy. And I hate to admit it, but there are people out there who don't think you can succeed.'

Ublala Pung's head snapped up, fire in his eyes. 'Who? Who?'

The four hens paused in their scratchings and cocked heads in unison.

'I better not say,' Tehol said. 'Anyway, we need food.'

The Tarthenal was on his feet, head crunching on the ceiling before he assumed his normal hunched posture when indoors. Plaster dust sprinkled his hair, drifted down to settle on the floor. The hens pounced, crowding his feet.

'If you fail,' Tehol said, 'we'll have to start eating, uh, plaster.'

'Lime is poisonous,' Janath said.

'And hen guano isn't? Did I hear you complain when you were slurping down my soup?'

'You had your hands over your ears, Tehol, and I wasn't slurping anything down, I was spewing it back up.'

'I can do it,' Ublala said, hands bunching into fists. 'I can get us food. I'll show you.' And with that he pushed through the doorway, out into the narrow alley, and was gone.

'How did you do that, Tehol?'

'I won't take credit. It's how Shurq Elalle manages him. Ublala Pung has an eagerness to show what he can do.'

'You prey on his low self-esteem, you mean.'

'Now that's rather hypocritical coming from a tutor, isn't it?'

'Ooh, all the old wounds still smarting, are they?'

'Never mind old wounds, Janath. You need to leave.'

'What? Are there rumours I'm incapable of something?'

'No, I'm serious. Any day now, there is going to be trouble. Here.'

'Where am I supposed to go?'

'You need to contact who's left of your scholarly friends – find one you can trust—'

'Tehol Beddict, really now. I have no friends among my fellow scholars, and certainly not one I can trust. You clearly know nothing of my profession. We crush beaks between our teeth as a matter of course. In any case, what kind of trouble are you talking about? This economic sabotage of yours?'

'Bugg should really learn to keep quiet.'

She was studying him in a most discomforting way. 'You know, Tehol Beddict, I never imagined you for an agent of evil.'

Tehol smoothed back his hair and swelled his chest.

'Very impressive, but I'm not convinced. Why are you doing all this? Is there some wound from the past that overwhelms all the others? Some terrible need for vengeance to answer some horrendous trauma of your youth? No, I am truly curious.'

'It was all Bugg's idea, of course.'

She shook her head. 'Try again.'

'There are all kinds of evil, Janath.'

'Yes, but yours will see blood spilled. Plenty of it.'

'Is there a difference between spilled blood and blood squeezed out slowly, excruciatingly, over the course of a foreshortened lifetime of stress, misery, anguish and despair – all in the name of some amorphous god that no-one dares call holy? Even as they bend knee and repeat the litany of sacred duty?'

'Oh my,' she said. 'Well, that is an interesting question. Is there a difference? Perhaps not, perhaps only as a matter of degree. But that hardly puts you on a moral high ground, does it?'

'I have never claimed a moral high ground,' Tehol said, 'which in itself sets me apart from my enemy.'

'Yes, I see that. And of course you are poised to destroy that enemy with its own tools, using its own holy scripture; using it, in short, to kill itself. You are at the very end of the slope on which perches your enemy. Or should I say "clings". Now, that you are diabolical comes as no surprise, Tehol. I saw that trait in you long ago. Even so, this bloodthirstiness? I still cannot see it.'

'Probably something to do with your lessons on pragmatism.'

'Oh now, don't you dare point a finger at me! True pragmatism, in this instance, would guide you to vast wealth and the reward of indolence, to the fullest exploitation of the system. The perfect parasite, and be damned to all those lesser folk, the destitute and the witless, the discarded failures squatting in every alley. You certainly possess the necessary talent and genius and indeed, were you now the wealthiest citizen of this empire, living in some enormous estate surrounded by an army of bodyguards and fifty concubines in your stable, I would not in the least be surprised.'

'Not surprised,' Tehol said, 'but, perhaps, disappointed nonetheless?'

She pursed her lips and glanced away. 'Well, that is another issue, Tehol Beddict. One we are not discussing here.'

'If you say so, Janath. In any case, the truth is, I *am* the wealthiest citizen in this empire. Thanks to Bugg, of course, my front man.'

'Yet you live in a hovel.'

'Disparaging my abode? You, an un-paying guest! I am deeply hurt, Janath.'

'No you're not.'

'Well, the hens are and since they do not speak Letherii . . .'

'Wealthiest citizen or not, Tehol Beddict, your goal is not the ostentatious expression of that wealth, not the fullest exploitation of the power it grants you. No, you intend the collapse of this empire's fundamental economic structure. And I still cannot fathom why.'

Tehol shrugged. 'Power always destroys itself in the end, Janath. Would you contest that assertion?'

'No. So, are you telling me that all of this is an exercise in power? An exercise culminating in a lesson no-one could not recognize for what it is? A metaphor made real?'

'But Janath, when I spoke of power destroying itself I was not speaking in terms of metaphor. I meant it literally. So, how many generations of Indebted need to suffer – even as the civilized trappings multiply and abound on all sides, with an ever-increasing proportion of those material follies out of their financial reach? How many, before we all collectively stop and say, "Aaii! That's enough! No more suffering, please! No more hunger, no more war, no more inequity!" Well, as far as I can see, there are never enough generations. We just scrabble on, and on, devouring all within reach, including our own kind, as if it was nothing more than the undeniable expression of some natural law, and as such subject to no moral context, no ethical constraint – despite the ubiquitous and disingenuous blathering over-invocation of those two grand notions.'

'Too much emotion in your speechifying, Tehol Beddict. Marks deducted.'

'Retreating to dry humour, Janath?'

'Ouch. All right, I begin to comprehend your motivations. You will trigger chaos and death, for the good of everyone.'

'If I were the self-pitying kind, I might now moan that no-one will thank me for it, either.'

'So you accept responsibility for the consequences.'

'Somebody has to.'

She was silent for a dozen heartbeats, and Tehol watched her eyes – lovely eyes indeed – slowly widen. '*You* are the metaphor made real.'

Tehol smiled. 'Don't like me? But that makes no sense! How can I not be likeable? Admirable, even? I am become the epitome of triumphant acquisitiveness, the very icon of this great unnamed god! And if I do nothing with all my vast wealth, why, I have earned the right. By every rule voiced in the sacred litany, *I have earned it!* '

'But where is the virtue in then destroying all that wealth? In destroying the very system you used to create it in the first place?'

'Janath, *where is the virtue in any of it?* Is possession a virtue? Is a lifetime of working for some rich toad a virtue? Is loyal employment in some merchant house a virtue? Loyal to what? To whom? Oh, have they paid for that loyalty with a hundred docks a week? Like any other commodity? But then, which version is truer – the virtue of self-serving acquisitiveness or the virtue of loyalty to one's employer? Are the merchants at the top of their treasure heaps not ruthless and cut-throat as befits those privileges they have purportedly earned? And if it's good enough for them, why not the same for the lowest worker in their house? Where is the virtue in two sets of rules at odds with each other, and why are those fancy words like "moral" and "ethical" the first ones to bleat out from the mouths of those who lost sight of both in their climb to the top? Since when did ethics and morality become weapons of submission?'

She was staring up at him, her expression unreadable.

Tehol thought to toss up his hands to punctuate his harangue, but he shrugged instead. 'Yet my heart breaks for a naked hen.'

'I'm sure it does,' she whispered.

'You should have left,' Tehol said.

'What?'

Boots clumping in the alley, rushing up to the doorway.

The flimsy broken shutter – newly installed by Bugg in the name of Janath's modesty – torn aside. Armoured figures pushing in.

A soft cry from Janath.

Tanal Yathvanar stared, disbelieving. His guards pushed in around him until he was forced to hold his arms out to the sides to block still more crowding into this absurd room with its clucking, frightened chickens and two wide-eyed citizens.

Well, *she* at least was wide-eyed. The man, who had to be the infamous Tehol Beddict, simply watched, ridiculous in his pinned blanket, as Tanal fixed his gaze on Janath and smiled. 'Unexpected, this.'

'I – I know you, don't I?'

Tehol asked in a calm voice, 'Can I help you?'

Confused by Janath's question, it was a moment before Tanal registered Tehol's words. Then he sneered at the man. 'I am here to arrest your manservant. The one named Bugg.'

'Oh, now really, his cooking isn't that bad.'

'As it turns out, it seems I have stumbled upon another crime in progress.'

Tehol sighed, then bent to retrieve a pillow. Into which he reached, dragging out a live chicken. Mostly plucked, only a few tufts remaining here and there. The creature tried flapping flabby pink wings, its head bobbing this way and that atop a scrawny neck. Tehol held the chicken out. 'Here, then. We never really expected the ransom in any case.'

Behind Tanal a guard grunted a quickly choked-off laugh.

Tanal scowled, reminding himself to find out who had made that noise. On report and a week of disciplinary duty should serve notice that such

unprofessionalism was costly in Tanal Yathvanar's presence. 'You are both under arrest. Janath, for having escaped the custody of the Patriotists. And Tehol Beddict, for harbouring said fugitive.'

'Ah, well,' Tehol said, 'if you were to check the Advocacy Accounts for the past month, sir, you will find the official pardon granted Janath Anar, in absentia. The kind of pardon your people always issue when someone has thoroughly and, usually, *permanently* disappeared. So, the scholar here is under full pardon, which in turn means I am not harbouring a fugitive. As for Bugg, why, when you track him down, tell him he's fired. I will brook no criminals in my household. Speaking of which, you may leave now, sir.'

*Oh no, she will not escape me a second time.* 'If said pardon exists,' Tanal said to Tehol Beddict, 'then of course you will both be released, with apologies. For the moment, however, you are now in my custody.' He gestured to one of his guards. 'Shackle them.'

'Yes sir.'

Bugg turned the corner leading into the narrow lane only to find it blocked by a freshly killed steer, legs akimbo, white tongue lolling as Ublala Pung – an arm wrapped about the beast's broken neck – grunted and pulled, his face red and the veins on his temples purple and bulging. The odd multiple pulsing of his hearts visibly throbbed on both sides of the Tarthenal's thick neck as he endeavoured to drag the steer to Tehol's door.

His small eyes lit up on seeing Bugg. 'Oh good. Help.'

'Where did you get this? Never mind. It will never fit in through the door, Ublala. You'll have to dismember it out here.'

'Oh.' The giant waved one hand. 'I'm always forgetting things.'

'Ublala, is Tehol home?'

'No. Nobody is.'

'Not even Janath?'

The Tarthenal shook his head, eyeing the steer, which was now thoroughly jammed in the lane. 'I'll have to rip its legs off,' he said. 'Oh, the

hens are home, Bugg.'

Bugg had been growing ever more nervous with each step that had brought him closer to their house, and now he understood why. But he should have been more than just nervous. He should have *known. My mind – I have been distracted. Distant worshippers, something closer to hand . . .* Bugg clambered over the carcass, pushing past Ublala Pung, which, given the sweat lathering the huge man, proved virtually effortless, then hurried to the doorway.

The shutter was broken, torn from its flimsy hinges. Inside, four hens marched about on the floor like aimless soldiers. Ublala Pung's pillow was trying to do the same.

*Shit. They've got them.*

There would be a scene at the headquarters of the Patriotists. Couldn't be helped. Wholesale destruction, an Elder God's rage unleashed – oh, this was too soon. Too many heads would look up, eyes narrowing, hunger bursting like juices under the tongue. *Just stay where you are. Stay where you are, Icarium. Lifestealer. Do not reach for your sword, do not let your brow knit. No furrows of anger to mar your unhuman face. Stay, Icarium!*

He entered the room, found a large sack.

Ublala Pung filled the doorway. 'What is happening?'

Bugg began throwing their few possessions into the sack.

'Bugg?'

He snatched up a hen and stuffed it in, then another.

'Bugg?'

The mobile pillow went last. Knotting the sack, Bugg turned about and gave it to Ublala Pung. 'Find somewhere else to hide out,' Bugg said. 'Here, it's all yours—'

'But what about the cow?'

'It's a steer.'

'I tried but it's jammed.'

'Ublala – all right, stay here, then, but you're on your own. Understand?'

'Where are you going? Where is everyone?'

Had Bugg told him then, in clear terms that Ublala Pung would comprehend, all might well have turned out differently. The Elder God would look back on this one moment, over all others, during his extended time of retrospection that followed. *Had he spoken true* – 'They're just gone, friend, and none of us will be back. Not for a long time. Maybe never. Take care of yourself, Ublala Pung, and 'ware your new god – he is much more than he seems.'

With that, Bugg was outside, climbing over the carcass once more and to the mouth of the alley. Where he halted.

They would be looking for him. On the streets. Did he want a running battle? No, just one single strike, one scene of unveiled power to send Patriotist body parts flying. Fast, then done. *Before I awaken the whole damned menagerie.*

*No, I need to move unseen now.*

*And quickly.*

The Elder God stirred power to life, power enough to pluck at his material being, disassembling it. No longer corporeal, he slipped down through the grimy cobbles of the street, into the veins of seepwater threading the entire city.

Yes, much swifter here, movement as fast as thought—

He tripped the snare before he was even aware that he had been pulled off course, drawn like an iron filing to a lodestone. Pulled, hard and then as if in a whirlpool, down to a block of stone buried in darkness. A stone of power – of Mael's very own power – *a damned altar!*

Eagerly claiming him, chaining him as all altars sought to do to their chosen gods. Nothing of sentience or malice, of course, but a certain

proclivity of structure. The flavour of ancient blood fused particle by particle into the stone's crystalline latticework.

Mael resisted, loosing a roar that shivered through the foundations of Letheras, even as he sought to reassert his physical form, to focus his strength—

And the trap was so sprung – by that very act of regaining his body. The altar, buried beneath rubble, the rubble grinding and shifting, a thousand minute adjustments ensnaring Mael – he could not move, could no longer even so much as cry out.

*Errant! You bastard!*

*Why?*

*Why have you done this to me?*

But the Errant had never shown much interest in lingering over his triumphs. He was nowhere close, and even if he had been, he would not have answered.

A player had been removed from the game.

But the game played on.

In the throne room of the Eternal Domicile, Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, sat alone, sword in one hand. In wavering torchlight he stared at nothing.

Inside his mind was another throne room, and in that place he was not alone. His brothers stood before him; and behind them, his father, Tomad, and his mother, Uruth. In the shadows along the walls stood Udinaas, Nisall, and the woman Rhulad would not name who had once been Fear's wife. And, close to the locked doors, one more figure, too lost in the dimness to make out. Too lost by far.

Binadas bowed his head. 'I have failed, Emperor,' he said. 'I have failed, my brother.' He gestured downward and Rhulad saw the spear transfixing Binadas's chest. 'A Toblakai, ghost of our ancient wars after the fall of the Kechra. Our wars on the seas. He returned to slay me. He is Karsa Orlong, a

Teblor, a Tartheno Toblakai, Tarthenal, Fenn – oh, they have many names now, yes. I am slain, brother, yet I did not die for you.' Binadas looked up then and smiled a dead man's smile. 'Karsa waits for you. He waits.'

Fear took a single step forward and bowed. Straightening, he fixed his heavy gaze on Rhulad – who whimpered and shrank back into his throne. 'Emperor. Brother. You are not the child I nurtured. You are no child I have nurtured. You betrayed us at the Spar of Ice. You betrayed me when you stole my betrothed, my love, when you made her with child, when you delivered unto her such despair that she took her own life.' As he spoke his dead wife walked forward to join him, their hands clasping. Fear said, 'I stand with Father Shadow now, brother, and I wait for you.'

Rhulad cried out, a piteous sound that echoed in the empty chamber.

Trull, his pate pale where his hair had once been, his eyes the eyes of the Shorn – empty, unseen by any, eyes that could not be met by those of any other Tiste Edur. Eyes of *alone*. He raised the spear in his hands, and Rhulad saw the crimson gleam on that shaft, on the broad iron blade. 'I led warriors in your name, brother, and they are now all dead. All dead.

'I returned to you, brother, when Fear and Binadas could not. To beg for your soul, your soul of old, Rhulad, for the child, the brother you had once been.' He lowered the spear, leaned on it. 'You drowned me, chained to stone, while the Rhulad I sought hid in the darkness of your mind. But he will hide no longer.'

From the gloom of the doors, the vague figure moved forward, and Rhulad on his throne saw himself. A youth, weaponless, unblooded, his skin free of coins, his skin smooth and clear.

'We stand in the river of Sengar blood,' Trull said. 'And we wait for you.'

'*Stop!* ' Rhulad shrieked. '*Stop!* '

'Truth,' said Udinaas, striding closer, 'is remorseless, Master. Friend?' The slave laughed. 'You were never my friend, Rhulad. You held my life in your hand – either hand, the empty one or the one with the sword, makes no difference. My life was yours, and you thought I had opened my heart to

you. Errant take me, why would I do that? Look at my face, Rhulad. This is a slave's face. No more memorable than a clay mask. This flesh on my bones? It works limbs that are naught but tools. I held my hands in the sea, Rhulad, until all feeling went away. All life, gone. From my once-defiant grasp.' Udinaas smiled. 'And now, Rhulad Sengar, who is the slave?

'I stand at the end of the chains. The end but one. One set of shackles. Here, do you see? I stand, and I wait for you.'

Nisall spoke, gliding forward naked, motion like a serpent's in candle-light. 'I spied on you, Rhulad. Found out your every secret and I have them with me now, like seeds in my womb, and soon my belly will swell, and the monsters will emerge, one after another. Spawn of your seed, Rhulad Sengar. Abominations one and all. And you imagined this to be love? I was your whore. The coin you dropped in my hand paid for my life, but it wasn't enough.

'I stand where you will never find me. I, Rhulad, do not wait for you.'

Remaining silent, then, at the last, his father, his mother.

He could remember when last he saw them, the day he had sent them to dwell chained in the belly of this city. Oh, that had been so clever, hadn't it?

But moments earlier one of the Chancellor's guards had begged audience. A terrible event to relate. The Letherii's voice had quavered like a badly strung lyre. Tragedy. An error in rotation among the jailers, a week passing without anyone descending to their cells. No food, but, alas, plenty of water.

A rising flood, in fact.

*'My Emperor. They were drowned. The cells, chest-deep, sire. Their chains . . . not long enough. Not long enough. The palace weeps. The palace cries out. The entire empire, sire, hangs its head.*

*'Chancellor Triban Gnol is stricken, sire. Taken to bed, unable to give voice to his grief.'*

Rhulad could stare down at the trembling man, stare down, yes, with the blank regard of a man who has known death again and again, known past

all feeling. And listen to these empty words, these proper expressions of horror and sorrow.

And in the Emperor's mind there could be these words: *I sent them down to be drowned. With not a single wager laid down.*

*The rising waters, this melting, this sinking palace. This Eternal Domicile. I have drowned my father. My mother.* He could see those cells, the black flood, the gouges in the walls where they had clawed at the very ends of those chains. He could see it all.

And so they stood. Silent. Flesh rotted and bloated with gases, puddles of slime spreading round their white, wrinkled feet. A father on whose shoulders Rhulad had ridden, shrieking with laughter, a child atop his god as it ran down the strand with limitless power and strength, with the promise of surety like a gentle kiss on the child's brow.

A mother – no, enough. *I die and die. More deaths, yes, than anyone can imagine. I die and I die, and I die.*

*But where is my peace?*

*See what awaits me? See them!*

Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, sat alone on his throne, dreaming peace. But even death could not offer that.

At that moment his brother, Trull Sengar, stood near Onrack, the emlava cubs squalling in the dirt behind them, and watched with wonder as Ben Adaephon Delat, a High Mage of the Malazan Empire, walked out across the shallow river. Unmindful of the glacial cold of that stream that threatened to leave numb his flesh, his bones, the very sentiments of his mind – nothing could deter him from this.

Upon seeing the lone figure appear from the brush on the other side, Quick Ben had halted. And, after a long moment, he had smiled, and under his breath he had said something like: 'Where else but here? Who else but him?' Then, with a laugh, the High Mage had set out.

To meet an old friend who himself strode without pause into that broad river.

Another Malazan.

Beside Trull, Onrack settled a hand on his shoulder and said, 'You, my friend, weep too easily.'

'I know,' Trull sighed. 'It's because, well, it's because I dream of such things. For myself. My brothers, my family. My people. The gifts of peace, Onrack – this is what breaks me, again and again.'

'I think,' said Onrack, 'you evade a deeper truth.'

'I do?'

'Yes. There is one other, is there not? Not a brother, not kin, not even Tiste Edur. One who offers another kind of peace, for you, a new kind. And this is what you yearn for, and see the echo of, even in the meeting of two friends such as we witness here.

'You weep when I speak of my ancient love.

'You weep for this, Trull Sengar, because your love has not been answered, and there is no greater anguish than that.'

'Please, friend. Enough. Look. I wonder what they are saying to each other?'

'The river's flow takes their words away, as it does us all.' Onrack's hand tightened on Trull's shoulder. 'Now, my friend, tell me of her.'

Trull Sengar wiped at his eyes, then he smiled. 'There was, yes, a most beautiful woman . . .'

# BOOK FOUR

# REAPER'S GALE

I went in search of death
In the cast down wreckage
Of someone's temple nave
I went in search among flowers
Nodding to the wind's words
Of woeful tales of war
I went among the blood troughs
Behind the women's tents
All the children that never were

And in the storm of ice and waves
I went in search of the drowned
Among bony shells and blunt worms
Where the grains swirled
Each and every one crying out
its name its life its loss
I went on the current roads
That led me nowhere known

And in the still mists afield
Where light itself crept uncertain
I went in search of wise spirits
Moaning their truths in dark loam
But the moss was silent, too damp to remember my search
Finding at last where the reapers sow
Cutting stalks to take the season
I failed in my proud quest

To a scything flint blade
And lying asward lost to summer
Bared as its warm carapace
of youthful promise was sent away
into autumn's reliquary sky
Until the bones of night
Were nails glittering in the cold

oblivion, and down the darkness
death came to find me

*Before Q'uson Tapi*
Toc Anaster

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

> The great conspiracy among the kingdoms of Saphinand, Bolkando, Ak'ryn, and D'rhasilhani that culminated in the terrible Eastlands War was in numerous respects profoundly ironic. To begin with, there had been no conspiracy. This fraught political threat was in fact a falsehood, created and fomented by powerful economic interests in Lether; and more, it must be said, than just economic. Threat of a dread enemy permitted the imposition of strictures on the population of the empire that well served the brokers among the elite; and would no doubt have made them rich indeed if not for the coincidental financial collapse occurring at this most inopportune of moments in Letherii history. In any case, the border kingdoms and nations of the east could not but perceive the imminent threat, especially with the ongoing campaign against the Awl on the north plains. Thus a grand alliance was indeed created, and with the aforementioned foreign incentives, the war exploded across the entire eastern frontier.
>
> Combined, not entirely accidentally, with the punitive invasion begun on the northwest coast, it is without doubt that Emperor Rhulad Sengar felt beleaguered indeed . . .
>
> *The Ashes of Ascension,*
> *History of Lether, Vol. IV*
> Calasp Hivanar

She had been no different from any other child with her childish dreams of love. Proud and tall, a hero to stride into her life, taking her in his arms and sweeping away all her fears like silts rushing down a stream to vanish in some distant ocean. The benediction of clarity and simplicity, oh my, yes, that had been a most cherished dream.

Although Seren Pedac could remember that child, could remember the twisting anguish in her stomach as she yearned for salvation, an anguish delicious in all its possible obliterations, she would not indulge in nostalgia. False visions of the world were a child's right, not something to be resented, but neither were they worthy of any adult sense of longing.

In Hull Beddict, after all, the young Seren Pedac had believed, for a time – a long time, in fact, before her foolish dream finally withered away – that she had found her wondrous hero, her majestic conjuration whose every glance was a blessing on her heart. So she had learned how purity was poison, the purity of her faith, that is, that such heroes existed. For her. For anyone.

Hull Beddict had died in Letheras. Or, rather, his body had died there. The rest had died in her arms years before then. In a way, she had used him and perhaps not just used him, but raped him. Devouring his belief, stealing away his vision – of himself, of his place in the world, of all the meaning that he, like any other man, sought for his own life. She had found her hero and had then, in ways subtle and cruel, destroyed him under the siege of reality. Reality as she had seen it, as she still saw it. That had been the poison within her, the battle between the child's dream and the venal cynicism that had seeped into adulthood. And Hull had been both her weapon and her victim.

She had in turn been raped. Drunk in a port city tearing itself apart as the armies of the Tiste Edur swept in amidst smoke, flames and ashes. Her flesh made weapon, her soul made victim. There could be no surprise, no blank astonishment, to answer her subsequent attempt to kill herself. Except among those who could not understand, who would never understand.

Seren killed what she loved. She had done it to Hull, and if the day ever arrived when that deadly flower opened in her heart once more, she would kill again. Fears could not be swept away. Fears returned in drowning tides, dragging her down into darkness. *I am poison.*

*Stay away. All of you, stay away.*

She sat, the shaft of the Imass spear athwart her knees, but it was the weight of the sword belted to her left hip that threatened to pull her down, as if that blade was not a hammered length of iron, but links in a chain. *He meant nothing by it. You meant nothing, Trull. I know that. Besides, like Hull, you are dead. You had the mercy of not dying in my arms. Be thankful for that.*

Nostalgia or no, the child still within her was creeping forward, in timid increments. It was safe, wasn't it, safe to cup her small unscarred hands and to show, in private oh-so-secret display, that old dream shining anew. Safe, because Trull was dead. No harm, none at all.

Loose the twist deep in her stomach – no, further down. She was now, after all, a grown woman. Loose it, yes, why not? For one who is poison, there is great pleasure in anguish. In wild longing. In the meaningless explorations of delighted surrender, subjugation – well, subjugation that was in truth domination – *no point in being coy here. I surrender in order to demand. Relinquish in order to rule. I invite the rape because the rapist is me and this body here is my weapon and you, my love, are my victim.*

*Because heroes die. As Udinaas says, it is their fate.*

The voice that was Mockra, that was the Warren of the Mind, had not spoken to her since that first time, as if, somehow, nothing more needed to be said. The discipline of control was hers to achieve, the lures of domination hers to resist. And she was managing both. Just.

In this the echoes of the past served to distract her, lull her into moments of sensual longing for a man now dead, a love that could never be. In this, even the past could become a weapon, which she wielded to fend off the present and indeed the future. But there were dangers here, too. Revisiting that moment when Trull Sengar had drawn his sword, had then set it into her hands. *He wished me safe. That is all. Dare I create in that something more? Even to drip honey onto desire?*

Seren Pedac glanced up. The fell gathering – her companions – were neither gathered nor companionable. Udinaas was down by the stream, upending rocks in search of crayfish – anything to add variety to their meals

– and the icy water had turned his hands first red, then blue, and it seemed he did not care. Kettle sat near a boulder, hunched down to fend off the bitter wind racing up the valley. She had succumbed to an uncharacteristic silence these past few days, and would not meet anyone's eyes. Silchas Ruin stood thirty paces away, at the edge of an overhang of layered rock, and he seemed to be studying the white sky – a sky the same hue as his skin. *'The world is his mirror,'* Udinaas had said earlier, with a hard laugh, before walking down to the stream. Clip sat on a flat rock about halfway between Silchas Ruin and everyone else. He had laid out his assortment of weapons for yet another intense examination, as if obsession was a virtue. Seren Pedac's glance found them all in passing, before her gaze settled on Fear Sengar.

Brother of the man she loved. Ah, was that an easy thing to say? Easy, perhaps, in its falsehood. Or in its simple truth. Fear believed that Trull's gift was more than it seemed; that even Trull hadn't been entirely aware of his own motivations. That the sad-faced Edur warrior had found in her, in Seren Pedac, Acquitor, a Letherii, something he had not found before in anyone. Not one of the countless beautiful Tiste Edur women he must have known. Young women, their faces unlined by years of harsh weather and harsher grief. Women who were not strangers. Women with still-pure visions of love.

This realm they now found themselves in, was it truly that of Darkness? Kurald Galain? Then why was the sky white? Why could she see with almost painful clarity every detail for such distances as left her mind reeling? The Gate itself had been inky, impenetrable – she had stumbled blindly, cursing the uneven, stony ground underfoot – twenty, thirty strides, and then there had been light. A rock-strewn vista, here and there a dead tree rising crooked into the pearlescent sky.

At what passed for dusk in this place that sky assumed a strange, pink tinge, before deepening to layers of purple and blue and finally black. So thus, a normal passage of day and night. Somewhere behind this cloak of white, then, a sun.

A sun in the Realm of Dark? She did not understand.

Fear Sengar had been studying the distant figure of Silchas Ruin. Now he turned and approached the Acquitor. 'Not long, now,' he said.

She frowned up at him. 'Until what?'

He shrugged, his eyes fixing on the Imass spear. 'Trull would have appreciated that weapon, I think. More than you appreciated his sword.'

Anger flared within her. 'He told me, Fear. He gave me his sword, not his heart.'

'He was distracted. His mind was filled with returning to Rhulad – to what would be his final audience with his brother. He could not afford to think of . . . other things. Yet those other things claimed his hands and the gesture was made. In that ritual, my brother's soul spoke.'

She looked away. 'It no longer matters, Fear.'

'It does to me.' His tone was hard, bitter. 'I do not care what you make of it, what you tell yourself now to avoid feeling anything. Once, a brother of mine demanded the woman I loved. I did not refuse him, and now she is dead. Everywhere I look, Acquitor, I see her blood, flowing down in streams. It will drown me in the end, but that is no matter. While I live, while I hold madness at bay, Seren Pedac, I will protect and defend you, for a brother of mine set his sword into your hands.'

He walked away then, and still she could not look at him. *Fear Sengar, you fool. A fool, like any other man, like every other man. What is it with your gestures? Your eagerness to sacrifice? Why do you all give yourselves to us? We are not pure vessels. We are not innocent. We will not handle your soul like a precious, fragile jewel. No, you fool, we'll abuse it as if it was our own, or, indeed, of lesser value than that – if that is possible.*

The crunch of stones, and suddenly Udinaas was crouching before her. In his cupped hands, a minnow. Writhing trapped in a tiny, diminishing pool of water.

'Plan on splitting it six ways, Udinaas?'

'It's not that, Acquitor. Look at it. Closely now. Do you see? It has no eyes. It is *blind*.'

'And is that significant?' But it was, she realized. She frowned up at him, saw the sharp glitter in his gaze. 'We are not seeing what is truly here, are we?'

'Darkness,' he said. 'The cave. The womb.'

'But . . . how?' She looked round. The landscape of broken rock, the pallid lichen and mosses and the very dead trees. The sky.

'Gift, or curse,' Udinaas said, straightening. 'She took a husband, didn't she?'

She watched him walking back to the stream, watched him tenderly returning the blind minnow to the rushing water. A gesture Seren would not have expected from him. *She? Who took a husband?*

'Gift or curse,' said Udinaas as he approached her once again. 'The debate rages on.'

'Mother Dark . . . and Father Light.'

He grinned his usual cold grin. 'At last, Seren Pedac stirs from her pit. I've been wondering about those three brothers.'

Three brothers?

He went on as if she knew of whom he was speaking. 'Spawn of Mother Dark, yes, but then, there were plenty of those, weren't there? Was there something that set those three apart? Andarist, Anomander, Silchas. What did Clip tell us? Oh, right, nothing. But we saw the tapestries, didn't we? Andarist, like midnight itself. Anomander, with hair of blazing white. And here, Silchas, our walking bloodless abomination, whiter than any corpse but just as friendly. So what caused the great rift between sons and mother? Maybe it wasn't her spreading her legs to Light like a stepfather none of them wanted. Maybe that's all a lie, one of those sweetly convenient ones. Maybe, Seren Pedac, it was finding out who their father was.'

She could not help but follow his gaze to where stood Silchas Ruin. Then she snorted and turned away. 'Does it matter?'

'Does it matter? Not right now,' Udinaas said. 'But it will.'

'Why? Every family has its secrets.'

He laughed. 'I have my own question. If Silchas Ruin is all Light on the outside, what must he be on the inside?'

*'The world is his mirror.'*

*But the world we now look upon is a lie.*

'Udinaas, I thought the *Tiste Edur* were the children of Mother Dark and Father Light.'

'Successive generations, probably. Not in any obvious way connected to those three brothers.'

'Scabandari.'

'Yes, I imagine so. Father Shadow, right? Ah, what a family that was! Let's not forget the sisters! Menandore with her raging fire of dawn, Sheltatha Lore the loving dusk, and Sukul Ankhadu, treacherous bitch of night. Were there others? There must have been, but they've since fallen by the wayside. Myths prefer manageable numbers, after all, and three always works best. Three of this, three of that.'

'But Scabandari would be the fourth—'

'Andarist is dead.'

*Oh. 'Andarist is dead.' And how does he know such things? Who speaks to you, Udinaas, in your nightly fevers?*

She could find out, she suddenly realized. She could slide in, like a ghost. She could, with the sorcery of Mockra, steal knowledge. *I could rape someone else's mind, is what I mean. Without his ever knowing.*

There was necessity, wasn't there? Something terrible was coming. Udinaas knew what it would be. What it might be, anyway. And Fear

Sengar – he had just vowed to protect her, as if he too suspected some awful confrontation was close at hand. *I remain the only one to know nothing.*

She could change that. She could use the power she had found within her. It was nothing more than self-protection. To remain ignorant was to justly suffer whatever fate awaited her; yes, in lacking ruthlessness she would surely deserve whatever befell her. For ignoring what Mockra offered, for ignoring this gift.

No wonder it had said nothing since that first conversation. She had been in her pit, stirring old sand to see what seeds might spring to life, but there was no light reaching that pit, and no life among the chill grains. An indulgent game and nothing more.

*I have a right to protect myself. Defend myself.*

Clip and Silchas Ruin were walking back. Udinaas was studying them with the avidness he had displayed when examining the blind minnow.

*I will have your secrets, slave. I will have those, and perhaps much, much more.*

Udinaas could not help but see Silchas Ruin differently. *In a new light, ha ha. The aggrieved son. One of them, anyway. Aggrieved sons, daughters, grandchildren, their children, on and on until the race of Shadow wars against that of Darkness. All on a careless word, an insult, the wrong look a hundred thousand years ago.*

*But, then, where are the children of Light?*

Well, a good thing, maybe, that they weren't around. Enough trouble brewing as it was, with Silchas Ruin and Clip on one side and Fear Sengar and – possibly – Scabandari on the other. *But of course Fear Sengar is no Mortal Sword of Shadow. Although he probably wants to be, even believes himself to be. Oh, this will play badly indeed, won't it?*

Silent, they walked on. Across this blasted, lifeless landscape. *But not quite! There are . . . minnows.*

The quest was drawing to a close. Just as well. Nothing worse, as far as he was concerned, than those legends of old when the stalwart, noble adventurers simply went on and on, through one absurd episode after another, with each one serving some arcane function for at least one of the wide-eyed fools, as befitted the shining serrated back of morality that ran the length of the story, from head to tip of that long, sinuous tail. *Legends that bite. Yes, they all do. That's the point of them.*

*But not this one, not this glorious quest of ours.* No thunderous message driving home like a spike of lightning between the eyes. No tumbling cascade of fraught scenes ascending like some damned stairs to the magical tower perched on the mountain's summit, where all truths were forged into the simple contest of hero against villain.

*Look at us! What heroes? We're all villains, and that tower doesn't even exist.*

*Yet.*

*I see blood dripping between the stones. Blood in its making. So much blood. You want that tower, Silchas Ruin? Fear Sengar? Clip? You want it that much? You will have to make it, and so you shall.*

Fevers every night. Whatever sickness whispered in his veins preferred the darkness of the mind that was sleep. Revelations arrived in torn fragments, pieces hinting of some greater truth, something vast. But he did not trust any of that – those revelations, they were all lies. *Someone's* lies. The Errant's? Menandore's? The fingers poking into his brain were legion. *Too many contradictions, each vision warring with the next.*

*What do you all want of me?*

Whatever it was, he wasn't going to give it. He'd been a slave but he was a slave no longer.

This realm had not been lived in for a long, long time. At least nowhere in this particular region. The trees were so long dead they had turned to brittle stone, right down to the thinnest twigs with their eternally frozen buds awaiting a season of life that never came. And that sun up there, somewhere

behind the white veil, well, it too was a lie. Somehow. *After all, Darkness should be dark, shouldn't it?*

He thought to find ruins or something. Proof that the Tiste Andii had once thrived here, but he had not seen a single thing that had been shaped by an intelligent hand, guided by a sentient mind. No roads, no trails of any kind.

When the hidden sun began its fade of light, Clip called a halt. Since arriving in this place, he had not once drawn out the chain and its two rings, the sole blessing to mark this part of their grand journey. There was nothing to feed a fire, so the dried remnants of smoked deer meat found no succulence in a stew and lent no warmth to their desultory repast.

What passed for conversation was no better.

Seren Pedac spoke. 'Clip, why is there light here?'

'We walk a road,' the young Tiste Andii replied. 'Kurald Liosan, Father Light's gift of long, long ago. As you can see, his proud garden didn't last very long.' He shrugged. 'Silchas Ruin and myself, well, naturally we don't need this, but leading you all by hand . . .' His smile was cold.

'Thought you were doing that anyway,' Udinaas said. The gloom was deepening, but he found that there was little effect on his vision, a detail he kept to himself.

'I was being kind in not stating the obvious, Letherii. Alas, you lack such tact.'

'Tact? Fuck tact, Clip.'

The smile grew harder. 'You are not needed, Udinaas. I trust you know that.'

A wince tightened Seren Pedac's face. 'There's no point in—'

'It's all right, Acquitor,' Udinaas said. 'I was getting rather tired of the dissembling bullshit anyway. Clip, where does this road lead? When we step off it, where will we find ourselves?'

'I'm surprised you haven't guessed.'

'Well, I have.'

Seren Pedac frowned across at Udinaas and asked, 'Will you tell me, then?'

'I can't. It's a secret – and yes, I know what I said about dissembling, but this way maybe you stay alive. Right now, and with what's to come, you have a chance of walking away, when all's said and done.'

'Generous of you,' she said wearily, glancing away.

'He is a slave,' Fear Sengar said. 'He knows nothing, Acquitor. How could he? He mended nets. He swept damp sheaves from the floor and scattered new ones. He shelled oysters.'

'And on the shore, one night,' Udinaas said, 'I saw a white crow.'

Sudden silence.

Finally, Silchas Ruin snorted. 'Means nothing. Except perhaps a presentiment of my rebirth. Thus, Udinaas, it may be you are a seer of sorts. Or a liar.'

'More likely both,' Udinaas said. 'Yet there was a white crow. Was it flying through darkness, or dusk? I'm not sure, but I think the distinction is, well, important. Might be worth some effort, remembering exactly, I mean. But my days of working hard at anything are done.' He glanced over at Silchas Ruin. 'We'll find out soon enough.'

'This is pointless,' Clip announced, settling back until he was supine on the hard ground, hands laced behind his head, staring up at the black, blank sky.

'So this is a road, is it?' Udinaas asked – seemingly of no-one in particular. 'Gift of Father Light. That's the interesting part. So, the question I'd like to ask is this: are we travelling it alone?'

Clip sat back up.

Udinaas smiled at him. 'Ah, you've sensed it, haven't you? The downy hair on the back of your neck trying to stand on end. Sensed. Smelled. A

whisper of air as from some high wind. Sending odd little chills through you. All that.'

Silchas Ruin rose, anger in his every line. 'Menandore,' he said.

'I would say she has more right to this road than we do,' Udinaas said. 'But Clip brought us here out of the goodness of his heart. Such noble intentions.'

'She tracks us,' Silchas Ruin muttered, hands finding the grips of his singing swords. Then he glared skyward. 'From the sky.'

'For your miserable family feuds are the only things worth living for, right?'

There was alarm in Fear Sengar's expression. 'I do not understand. Why is Sister Dawn following us? What cares she for the soul of Scabandari?'

'The Finnest,' Clip said under his breath. Then, louder, 'Bloodeye's soul, Edur. She seeks to claim it for herself. Its power.'

Udinaas sighed. 'So, Silchas Ruin, what terrible deed did you commit on your sun-locked sister? Or daughter, or whatever relation she is? Why is she out for your blood? Just what did you all do to each other all those millennia ago? Can't you kiss and make up? No, I imagine not.'

'There was no crime,' Silchas Ruin said. 'We are enemies in the name of ambition, even when I would not have it so. Alas, to live as long as we have, it seems there is naught else to sustain us. Naught but rage and hunger.'

'I suggest a huge mutual suicide,' Udinaas said. 'You and all your wretched kin, and you, Clip, you could just jump in to appease your ego or something. Vanish from the mortal realms, all of you, and leave the rest of us alone.'

'Udinaas,' Clip said with amusement, 'this is not a mortal realm.'

'Rubbish.'

'Not as you think of one, then. This is a place of elemental forces. Unfettered, and beneath every surface, the potential for chaos. This is a realm of the Tiste.'

Seren Pedac seemed startled. 'Just "Tiste"? Not Andii, Edur—'

'Acquitor,' Silchas Ruin said, 'the Tiste are the first children. The very first. Ours were the first cities, the first civilizations. Rising here, in realms such as this one. As Clip has said, *elemental*.'

'Then what of the Elder Gods?' Seren Pedac demanded.

Neither Clip nor Silchas Ruin replied, and the silence stretched, until Udinaas snorted a laugh. 'Unwelcome relatives. Pushed into closets. Bar the door, ignore the knocking and let's hope they move on. It's ever the problem with all these creation stories. "We're the first, isn't it obvious? Those others? Ignore them. Imposters, interlopers, and worse! Look at us, after all! Dark, Light, and the gloom in between! Could anyone be purer, more elemental, than that?" The answer, of course, is yes. Let's take an example, shall we?'

'Nothing preceded Darkness,' said Clip, irritation sharpening his pronouncement.

Udinaas shrugged. 'That seems a reasonable enough assertion. But then, is it? After all, Darkness is not just absence of light, is it? Can you have a negative definition like that? But maybe Clip wasn't being nearly so offhand as he sounded just there. *"Nothing preceded Darkness." Nothing* indeed. True absence, then, of anything. Even Darkness. But wait, where does chaos fit in? Was that *Nothing* truly empty, or was it filled with chaos? Was Darkness the imposition of order on chaos? Was it the *only* imposition of order on chaos? That sounds presumptuous. Would that Feather Witch was here – there's too much of the Tiles that I've forgotten. All that birth of this and birth of that stuff. But chaos also produced Fire. It must have, for without Fire there is no Light. One might also say that without Light there is no Dark, and without both there is no Shadow. But Fire needs fuel to burn, so we would need matter of some kind – solids – born of Earth. And Fire needs air, and so—'

'I am done listening to all of this nonsense,' Silchas Ruin said.

The Tiste Andii walked off into the night, which wasn't night at all – at least not in the eyes of Udinaas, and he found he could watch Silchas Ruin as the warrior went on for another forty or so paces, then spun round to face the camp once more. *Ah, White Crow, you would listen on, would you? Yet with none to see your face, none to challenge you directly.*

*My guess is, Silchas Ruin, you are as ignorant as the rest of us when it comes to the birth of all existence. That your notions are as quaint as ours, and just as pathetic, too.*

Fear Sengar spoke. 'Udinaas, the Edur women hold that the Kechra bound all that exists to time itself, thus assuring the annihilation of everything. Their great crime. Yet that death – I have thought hard on this – that death, it does not have the face of chaos. The very opposite, in fact.'

'Chaos pursues,' Clip muttered with none of his characteristic arrogance. 'It is the Devourer. Mother Dark scattered its power, its armies, and it seeks ever to rejoin, to become one again, for when that happens no other power – not even Mother Dark – can defeat it.'

'Mother Dark must have had allies,' Udinaas said. 'Either that, or she ambushed chaos, caught her enemy unawares. Was all existence born of betrayal, Clip? Is that the core of your belief? No wonder you are all at each other's throats.' *Listen well, Silchas Ruin; I am closer on your trail than you ever imagined.* Which, he thought then, might not be wise; might, in fact, prove fatal. 'In any case, Mother Dark herself had to have been born of something. A conspiracy within chaos. Some unprecedented alliance where all alliances were forbidden. So, yet another betrayal.'

Fear Sengar leaned forward slightly. 'Udinaas, how did you know we were being followed? By Menandore.'

'Slaves need to hone their every sense, Fear Sengar. Because our masters are fickle. You might wake up one morning with a toothache, leaving you miserable and short-tempered, and in consequence an entire family of slaves might suffer devastation before the sun's at midday. A dead husband

or wife, a dead parent, or both. Beaten, maimed for life, blinded, dead – every possibility waits in our shadows.'

He did not think Fear was convinced, and, granted, the argument was thin. True, those heightened senses might be sufficient to raise the hackles, to light the instincts that *something* was on their trail. But that was not the same as knowing that it was Menandore. *I was careless in revealing what I knew. I wanted to knock the fools off balance, but that has just made them more dangerous. To me.*

*Because now they know – or will know, soon enough – that this useless slave does not walk alone.*

For the moment, however, no-one was inclined to challenge him.

Drawing out bedrolls, settling in for a passage of restless sleep. Dark that was not dark. Light that was not light. Slaves who might be masters, and somewhere ahead of them all, a bruised stormcloud overhead, filled with thunder, lightning, and crimson rain.

She waited until the slave's breathing deepened, lengthened, found the rhythm of slumber. The wars of conscience were past. Udinaas had revealed enough secret knowledge to justify this. He had never left his slavery behind, and now his Mistress was Menandore, a creature by all accounts as treacherous, vicious and cold-blooded as any other in that ancient family of what-might-be-gods.

Mockra whispered into life in her mind, as free as wandering thought, unconstrained by a shell of hard bone, by the well-worn pathways of the mind. A tendril lifting free, hovering in the air above her, she gave it the shape of a serpent, head questing, tongue flicking to find the scent of Udinaas, of the man's very soul – there, sliding forward to close, a touch—

*Hot!*

Seren Pedac felt that serpent recoil, felt the ripples sweep back into her in waves of scalding heat.

Fever dreams, the fire of Udinaas's soul. The man stirred in his blankets.

She would need to be more subtle, would need the essence of the serpent she had chosen. Edging forward once more, finding that raging forge, then burrowing down, through hot sand, beneath it. Oh, there was pain, yes, but it was not, she now realized, some integral furnace of his soul. It was the realm his dream had taken him into, a realm of blistering light—

Her eyes opened onto a torn landscape. Boulders baked red and brittle. Thick, turgid air, the breath of a potter's kiln. Blasted white sky overhead.

Udinaas wandered, staggering, ten paces away.

She sent her serpent slithering after him.

An enormous shadow slid over them – Udinaas spun and twisted to glare upward as that shadow flowed past, then on, and the silver and gold scaled dragon, gliding on stretched wings, flew over the ridge directly ahead, then, a moment later, vanished from sight.

Seren saw Udinaas waiting for it to reappear. And then he saw it again, now tiny as a speck, a glittering mote in the sky, fast dwindling. The Letherii slave cried out, but Seren could not tell if the sound had been one of rage or abandonment.

*No-one likes being ignored.*

Stones skittered near the serpent and in sudden terror she turned its gaze, head lifting, to see a woman. Not Menandore. No, a Letherii. Small, lithe, hair so blonde as to be almost white. Approaching Udinaas, tremulous, every motion revealing taut, frayed nerves.

Another intruder.

Udinaas had yet to turn from that distant sky, and Seren watched as the Letherii woman drew still closer. Then, five paces away, she straightened, ran her hands through her wild, burnished hair. In a sultry voice, the strange woman spoke. 'I have been looking for you, my love.'

He did not whirl round. He did not even move, but Seren saw something new in the lines of his back and shoulders, the way he now held his head. In his voice, when he replied, there was amusement. ' "My love"?' And then he

faced her, with ravaged eyes, a bleakness like defiant ice in this world of fire. 'No longer the startled hare, Feather Witch – yes, I see the provocative way you now look at me, the brazen confidence, the *invitation*. And in all that, the truth that is your contempt still burns through. Besides,' he added, 'I heard you scrabbling closer, could smell, even, your fear. What do you want, Feather Witch?'

'I am not frightened, Udinaas,' the woman replied.

*That name, yes. Feather Witch. The fellow slave, the Caster of the Tiles. Oh, there is history between them beyond what any of us might have imagined.*

'But you are,' Udinaas insisted. 'Because you expected to find me alone.'

She stiffened, then attempted a shrug. 'Menandore feels nothing for you, my love. You must realize that. You are naught but a weapon in her hands.'

'Hardly. Too blunted, too pitted, too fragile by far.'

Feather Witch's laugh was high and sharp. 'Fragile? Errant take me, Udinaas, you have never been *that*.'

Seren Pedac certainly agreed with her assessment. What reason this false modesty?

'I asked what you wanted. Why are you here?'

'I have changed since you last saw me,' Feather Witch replied. 'I am now Destra Irant to the Errant, to the last Elder God of the Letherii. Who stands behind the Empty Throne—'

'It's not empty.'

'It will be.'

'Now there's your new-found faith getting in the way again. All that hopeful insistence that you are once more at the centre of things. Where is your flesh hiding right now, Feather Witch? In Letheras, no doubt. Some airless, stinking hovel that you have proclaimed a temple – yes, that stings you, telling me I am not in error. About you. Changed, Feather Witch?

Well, fool yourself if you like. But don't think I'm deceived. Don't think I will now fall into your arms gasping with lust and devotion.'

'You once loved me.'

'I once pressed red-hot coins into Rhulad's dead eyes, too. But they weren't dead, alas. The past is a sea of regrets, but I have crawled a way up the shore now, Feather Witch. Quite a way, in fact.'

'We belong together, Udinaas. Destra Irant and T'orrud Segul, and we will have, at our disposal, a Mortal Sword. Letherii, all of us. As it should be, and through us the Errant rises once more. Into power, into domination – it is what our people need, what we have needed for a long time.'

'The Tiste Edur—'

'Are on their way out. Rhulad's Grey Empire – it was doomed from the start. Even you saw that. It's tottering, crumbling, falling to pieces. But we Letherii will survive. We always do, and now, with the rebirth of the faith in the Errant, our empire will make the world tremble. Destra Irant, T'orrud Segul and Mortal Sword, we shall be the three behind the Empty Throne. Rich, free to do as we please. We shall have Edur for slaves. Broken, pathetic Edur. Chained, beaten, we shall use them up, as they once did to us. Love me or not, Udinaas. Taste my kiss or turn away, it does not matter. You are T'orrud Segul. The Errant has chosen you—'

'He tried, you mean. I sent the fool away.'

She was clearly stunned into silence.

Udinaas half turned with a dismissive wave of one hand. 'I sent Menandore away, too. They tried using me like a coin, something to be passed back and forth. But I know all about coins. I've smelled the burning stench of their touch.' He glanced back at her again. 'And if I am a coin, then I belong to no-one. Borrowed, occasionally. Wagered, often. Possessed? Never for long.'

'T'orrud Segul—'

'Find someone else.'

'You have been chosen, you damned fool!' She started forward suddenly, tearing at her own threadbare slave's tunic. Cloth ripped, fluttered on the hot wind like the tattered fragments of some imperial flag. She was naked, reaching out to drag Udinaas round, arms encircling his neck—

His push sent her sprawling onto the hard, stony ground. 'I'm done with rapes,' he said in a low, grating voice. 'Besides, I told you we have company. You clearly didn't completely understand me—' And he walked past her, walked straight towards the serpent that was Seren Pedac.

She woke with a calloused hand closed about her throat. Stared up into glittering eyes in the gloom.

She could feel him trembling above her, his weight pinning her down, and he lowered his face to hers, then, wiry beard bristling along her cheek, brought his mouth to her right ear, and began whispering.

'I have been expecting something like that, Seren Pedac, for some time. Thus, you had my admiration . . . of your restraint. Too bad, then, it didn't last.'

She was having trouble breathing; the hand wrapping her throat was an iron band.

'I meant what I said about rapes, Acquitor. If you ever do that again, I will kill you. Do you understand me?'

She managed a nod, and she could see now, in his face, the full measure of the betrayal he was feeling, the appalling *hurt*. That she would so abuse him.

'Think nothing of me,' Udinaas continued, 'if that suits the miserable little hole you live in, Seren Pedac. It's what wiped away your restraint in the first place, after all. But I have had goddesses use me. And gods try to. And now a scrawny witch I once lusted after, who dreams her version of tyranny is preferable to everyone else's. I was a slave – I am used to being used, remember? But – and listen carefully, woman – *I am a slave no longer*—'

Fear Sengar's voice came down from above them. 'Release her throat, Udinaas. That which you feel at the back of your own neck is the tip of my

sword – and yes, that trickle of blood belongs to you. The Acquitor is Betrothed to Trull Sengar. She is under my protection. Release her now, or die.'

The hand gripping her throat loosened, lifted clear—

And Fear Sengar had one hand in the slave's hair, was tearing him back, flinging him onto the ground, the sword hissing in a lurid blur—

'NO!' Seren Pedac shrieked, clawing across to throw herself down onto Udinaas. 'No, Fear! Do not touch him!'

'Acquitor—'

Others awake now, rising on all sides—

'Do not hurt him!' *I have done enough of that this night.* 'Fear Sengar – Udinaas, he had that right—' *Oh, Errant save me* – 'He had that right,' she repeated, her throat feeling torn on the inside from that first shriek. 'I – listen, don't, Fear, you don't understand. I . . . I did something. Something terrible. Please . . .' she was sitting up now, speaking to everyone, 'please, this is my fault.'

Udinaas pushed her weight to one side, and she scraped an elbow raw as he clambered free. 'Make it day again, Silchas Ruin,' he said.

'The night—'

'*Make it day again, damn you! Enough sleep – let's move on. Now!* '

To Seren Pedac's astonishment, the sky began to lighten once more. *What? How?*

Udinaas was at his bedroll, fighting to draw it together, stuff it into his pack. She saw tears glittering on his weathered cheeks.

*Oh, what have I done. Udinaas—*

'You understand too much,' Clip said in that lilting, offhand tone of his. 'Did you hear me, Udinaas?'

'Go fuck yourself,' the slave muttered.

Silchas Ruin said, 'Leave him, Clip. He is but a child among us. And he will play his childish games.'

Ashes drifting down to bury her soul, Seren Pedac turned away from all of them. *No, the child is me. Still. Always.*

*Udinaas . . .*

Twelve paces away, Kettle sat, legs drawn under her, and held hands with Wither, ghost of an Andii, and there was neither warmth nor chill in that grip. She stared at the others as the light slowly burgeoned to begin a new day.

'What they do to each other,' she whispered.

Wither's hand tightened around hers. 'It is what it is to live, child.'

She thought about that, then. The ghost's words, the weariness in the tone, and, after a long time, she finally nodded.

*Yes, this is what it is to live.*

It made all that she knew was coming a little easier to bear.

In the litter-scattered streets of Drene, the smell of old smoke was bitter in the air. Black smears adorned building walls. Crockery, smashing down from toppled carts, had flung pieces everywhere, as if the sky the night before had rained glazed sherds. Bloodstained cloth, shredded and torn remnants of tunics and shirts, were blackening under the hot sun. Just beyond the lone table where sat Venitt Sathad, the chaos of the riot that had ignited the previous day's dusk was visible on all sides.

The proprietor of the kiosk bar limped back out from the shadowed alcove that served as kitchen and storehouse, bearing a splintered tray with another dusty bottle of Bluerose wine. The stunned look in the old man's eyes had yet to retreat, giving his motions an oddly disarticulated look as he set the bottle down on Venitt Sathad's table, bowed, then backed away.

The few figures that had passed by on the concourse this morning had each paused in their furtive passage to stare at Venitt – not because, he knew, he was in any way memorable or imposing, but because in sitting

here, eating a light breakfast and now drinking expensive wine, the servant of Rautos Hivanar presented a scene of civil repose. Such a scene now jarred, now struck those who had weathered the chaos of the night before, as if lit with its very own madness.

A hundred versions clouded the riot's beginning. A money-lender's arrest. A meal overcharged and an argument that got out of hand. A sudden shortage of this or that. Two Patriotist spies beating someone, and then being set upon by twenty bystanders. Perhaps none of these things had occurred; perhaps they all had.

The riot had destroyed half the market on this side of the city. It had then spilled into the slums northwest of the docks, where, judging from the smoke, it raged on unchecked.

The garrison had set out into the streets to conduct a brutal campaign of pacification that was indiscriminate at first, but eventually found focus in a savage assault on the poorest people of Drene. At times in the past, the poor – being true victims – had been easily cowed by a few dozen cracked skulls. But not this time. They had had enough, and they had fought back.

In this morning's air, Venitt Sathad could still smell the shock – sharper by far than the smoke, colder than any bundle of bloody cloth that might still contain pieces of human meat – the shock of guards screaming with fatal wounds, of armoured bullies being cornered then torn apart by frenzied mobs. The shock, finally, of the city garrison's ignoble retreat to the barracks.

They had been under strength, of course. Too many out with Bivatt in the campaign against the Awl. And they had been arrogant, emboldened by centuries of precedent. And that arrogance had blinded them to what had been happening out there, to what was about to happen.

The one detail that remained with Venitt Sathad, lodged like a sliver of wood in infected flesh that no amount of wine could wash away, was what had happened to the resident Tiste Edur.

*Nothing.*

The mobs had left them alone. Extraordinary, inexplicable. *Frightening*.

No, instead, half a thousand shrieking citizens had stormed Letur Anict's estate. Of course, the Factor's personal guards were, one and all, elite troops – recruited from every Letherii company that had ever been stationed in Drene – and the mob had been repulsed. It was said that corpses lay in heaps outside the estate's walls.

Letur Anict had returned to Drene two days before, and Venitt Sathad suspected that the Factor had been as unprepared for the sudden maelstrom as had the garrison. In Overseer Brohl Handar's absence, Letur governed the city and its outlying region. Whatever reports his agents might have delivered upon his return would have been rife with fears but scant on specifics – the kind of information that Letur Anict despised and would summarily dismiss. Besides, the Patriotists were supposed to take care of such things in their perpetual campaign of terror. A few more arrests, some notable disappearances, the confiscation of properties.

Of course, Rautos Hivanar, his master, had noted the telltale signs of impending chaos. Tyrannical control was dependent on a multitude of often disparate forces, running the gamut from perception to overt viciousness. The sense of power needed to be pervasive in order to create and maintain the illusion of omniscience. Invigilator Karos Invictad understood that much, at least, but where the thug in red silks failed was in understanding that thresholds existed, and to cross them – with ever greater acts of brutality, with paranoia and fear an ever-rising fever – was to see the illusion shattered.

At some point, no matter how repressive the regime, the citizenry will come to comprehend the vast power in their hands. The destitute, the Indebted, the beleaguered middle classes; in short, the myriad victims. Control was sleight of hand trickery, and against a hundred thousand defiant citizens, it stood no real chance. All at once, the game was up.

The threshold, this time, was precisely as Rautos Hivanar had feared. The pressure of a crumbling, overburdened economy. Shortage of coin, the crushing weight of huge and ever-growing debts, the sudden inability to pay for anything. The Patriotists could draw knives, swords, could wield their

knotted clubs, but against desperate hunger and a sense of impending calamity, they might as well have been swinging reeds at the wind.

In the face of all this, the Tiste Edur were helpless. Bemused, uncomprehending, and wholly unprepared. *Unless, that is, their answer will be to begin killing. Everyone.*

Another of Karos Invictad's blind spots. The Invigilator's contempt for the Tiste Edur could well prove suicidal. Their Emperor could not be killed. Their K'risnan could unleash sorcery that could devour every Letherii in the empire. And the fool thought to target them in a campaign of arrests?

No, the Patriotists had been useful; indeed, for a time, quite necessary. But—

'Venitt Sathad, welcome to Drene.'

Without looking up, Venitt gestured with one hand as he reached for the wine bottle. 'Find yourself a chair, Orbyn Truthfinder.' A glance upward. 'I was just thinking about you.'

The huge, odious man smiled. 'I am honoured. If, that is, your thoughts were of me specifically. If, however, they were of the Patriotists, well, I suspect that "honour" would be the wrong word indeed.'

The proprietor was struggling to drag another chair out to the table, but it was clear that whatever had caused the limp was proving most painful. Venitt Sathad set the bottle back down, rose, and walked over to help him.

'Humble apologies, kind sir,' the old man gasped, his face white and beads of sweat spotting his upper lip. 'Had a fall yestereve, sir—'

'Must have been a bad one. Here, leave the chair to me, and find us another unbroken bottle of wine – if you can.'

'Most obliged, sir . . .'

Wondering where the old man had found this solid oak dining chair – one large enough to take Orbyn's mass – Venitt Sathad pulled it across the cobbles and positioned it opposite his own chair with the table in between, then he sat down once more.

'If not honour,' he said, retrieving the bottle again and refilling the lone clay cup, 'then what word comes to mind, Orbyn?'

Truthfinder eased down into the chair, gusting out a loud, wheezing sigh. 'We can return to that anon. I have been expecting your arrival for some time now.'

'Yet I found neither you nor the Factor in the city, Orbyn, upon my much-anticipated arrival.'

A dismissive gesture, as the proprietor limped up with a cup and a second bottle of Bluerose wine, then retreated with head bowed. 'The Factor insisted I escort him on a venture across the sea. He has been wont to waste my time of late. I assure you, Venitt, that such luxuries are now part of the past. For Letur Anict.'

'I imagine he is in a most discomfited state at the moment.'

'Rattled.'

'He lacks confidence that he can restore order?'

'Lack of confidence has never been Letur Anict's weakness. Reconciling it with reality is, alas.'

'It is unfortunate that the Overseer elected to accompany Atri-Preda Bivatt's campaign to the east.'

'Possibly fatally so, yes.'

Venitt Sathad's brows lifted. 'Have some wine, Orbyn. And please elaborate on that comment.'

'There are assassins in that company,' Truthfinder replied, frowning to indicate his distaste. 'Not mine, I assure you. Letur plays his own game with the Overseer. Political. In truth, I do not expect Brohl Handar to return to Drene, except perhaps as a wrapped, salted corpse.'

'I see. Of course, this sparring of his has now put him at a great disadvantage.'

Orbyn nodded as he poured his cup full. 'Yes, with Brohl nowhere in sight, the blame for last night's riot rests exclusively with the Factor. There will be repercussions, no doubt?'

'Truthfinder, that riot is not yet over. It will continue into this night, where it will boil out from the slums with still greater force and ferocity. There will be more assaults on Letur's estate, and before long on all of his properties and holdings throughout Drene, and those he will not be able to protect. The barracks will be under siege. There will be looting. There will be slaughter.'

Orbyn was leaning forward, rubbing at his oily brow. 'So it is true, then. Financial collapse.'

'The empire reels. The Liberty Consign is mortally wounded. When the people learn that there have been other riots, in city after city—'

'The Tiste Edur will be stirred awake.'

'Yes.'

Orbyn's eyes fixed on Venitt Sathad's. 'There are rumours of war in the west.'

'West? What do you mean?'

'An invasion from the sea, that seems to be focused on the Tiste Edur themselves. Punitive, in the wake of the fleets. A distant empire that did not take kindly to the murder of its citizens. And now, reports of the Bolkando and their allies, massing along the border.'

A tight smile from Venitt Sathad. 'The alliance we forged.'

'Indeed. Another of Letur Anict's brilliant schemes gone awry.'

'Hardly his exclusively, Orbyn. Your Patriotists were essential participants in that propaganda.'

'I wish I could deny that. And so we come to that single word, the one that filled my mind in the place of "honour". I find you here, in Drene. Venitt Sathad, understand me. I know what you do for your master, and I know

just how well you do it. I know what even Karos Invictad does not – nor have I any interest in enlightening him. Regarding you, sir.'

'You wish to speak for yourself, now? Rather than the Patriotists?'

'To stay alive, yes.'

'Then the word is indeed not honour.'

Orbyn Truthfinder, the most feared man in Drene, drained his cup of wine. He leaned back. 'You sit here, amidst carnage. People hurry past and they see you, and though you are, in features and in stature, barely worth noting, notice you they do. And a chill grips their hearts, and they do not know why. But I do.'

'You comprehend, then, that I must pay Letur Anict a visit.'

'Yes, and I wish you well in that.'

'Unfortunately, Orbyn, we find ourselves in a moment of crisis. In the absence of Overseer Brohl Handar, it falls to Letur Anict to restore order. Yes, he may well fail, but he must be given the opportunity to succeed. For the sake of the empire, Orbyn, I expect you and your agents to assist the Factor in every way possible.'

'Of course. But I have lost thirty-one agents since yesterday. And those among them who had families . . . well, no-one was spared retribution.'

'It is a sad truth, Orbyn, that all who have been rewarded by tyranny must eventually share an identical fate.'

'You sound almost satisfied, Venitt.'

The Indebted servant of Rautos Hivanar permitted a faint smile to reach his lips as he reached for his cup of wine.

Orbyn's expression flattened. 'Surely,' he said, 'you do not believe a mob is capable of justice?'

'They have been rather restrained, thus far.'

'You cannot be serious.'

'Orbyn, not one Tiste Edur has been touched.'

'Because the rioters are not fools. Who dares face Edur sorcery? It was the very inactivity of the local Edur that incited the mobs to ever more vicious extremes – and I assure you, Letur Anict is well aware of that fact.'

'Ah, so he would blame the Tiste Edur for this mess. How convenient.'

'I am not here to defend the Factor, Venitt Sathad.'

'No, you are here to bargain for your life.'

'I will of course assist Letur Anict in restoring order. But I am not confident that he will succeed, and I will not throw away my people.'

'Actually, you will do just that.'

Orbyn's eyes widened. Sweat was now trickling down his face. His clothes were sticking patchily to the folds of fat beneath.

'Truthfinder,' Venitt Sathad continued, 'the Patriotists have outlived their usefulness, barring one last, most noble sacrifice. As the focus of the people's rage. I understand there is a Drene custom, something to do with the season of storms, and the making of seaweed fisher folk – life-sized dolls with shells for eyes, dressed in old clothes and the like. Sent out to mark the season's birth, I believe, in small boats. An offering to the sealords of old – for the storms to drown. Quaint and unsurprisingly bloodthirsty, as most old customs are. The Patriotists, Orbyn, must become Drene's seaweed fisher folk. We are in a season of storms, and sacrifices are necessary.'

Truthfinder licked his lips. 'And what of me?' he asked in a whisper.

'Ah, that particular session of bargaining is not yet complete.'

'I see.'

'I hope so.'

'Venitt Sathad, my agents – there are wives, husbands, children—'

'Yes, I am sure there are. Just as there were wives, husbands and children of all those you happily arrested, tortured and murdered all in the name of

personal financial gain. The people, Orbyn, do understand redressing an imbalance.'

'This is as Rautos Hivanar demands—'

'My master leaves the specifics to me. He respects my record of . . . efficiency. While the authority he represents no doubt bolsters compliance, I rarely make overt use of it. By that I mean I rarely find the need. You said you know me, Truthfinder, did you not?'

'I know you, Venitt Sathad, for the man who found Gerun Eberict's murderer and sent that half-blood away with a chest full of coins. I know you for the killer of a hundred men and women at virtually every level of society, and, no matter how well protected, they die, and you emerge unscathed, your identity unknown—'

'Except, it seems, to you.'

'I stumbled onto your secret life, Venitt Sathad, many years ago. And I have followed your career, not just within the empire, but in the many consulates and embassies where your . . . skills . . . were needed. To advance Letherii interests. I am a great admirer, Venitt Sathad.'

'Yet now you seek to cast in the coin of your knowledge in order to purchase your life. Do you not comprehend the risk?'

'What choice do I have? By telling you all I know, I am also telling you I have no illusions – I know why you are here, and what you need to do; indeed, my only surprise is that it has taken Rautos Hivanar so long to finally send you. In fact, it might be you have arrived too late, Venitt Sathad.'

To that, Venitt slowly nodded. Orbyn Truthfinder was a dangerous man. Yet, for the moment, still useful. As, alas, was Letur Anict. But such things were measured day by day, at times moment by moment. *Too late. You fool, Orbyn, even you have no real idea just how true that statement is – too late.*

*Tehol Beddict played a small game, once, to see how it would work out. But this time – with that damned manservant of his – he has played a game on a scale almost beyond comprehension.*

*And I am Venitt Sathad. Indebted, born of Indebted, most skilled slave and assassin of Rautos Hivanar, and you, Tehol Beddict – and you, Bugg – need never fear me.*

*Take the bastards down. Every damned one of them. Take them all down.*

It seemed Orbyn Truthfinder saw something in his expression then that drained all colour from the man's round, sweat-streamed face.

Venitt Sathad was amused. *Orbyn, have you found a truth?*

Scattered to either side of the dark storm front, grey clouds skidded across the sky, dragging slanting sheets of rain. The plains were greening along hillsides and in the troughs of valleys, a mottled patchwork of lichen, mosses and matted grasses. On the summit of a nearby hill was the carcass of a wild bhederin, hastily butchered after dying to a lightning strike. The beast's legs were sticking up into the air and on one hoof was perched a storm-bedraggled crow. Eviscerated entrails stretched out and down the slope facing Brohl Handar and his troop as they rode past.

The Awl were on the run. Warriors who had died of their wounds were left under heaps of stones, and they were as road-markers for the fleeing tribe, although in truth unnecessary since with the rains the trail was a broad swath of churned ground. In many ways, this uncharacteristic carelessness worried the Overseer, but perhaps it was as Bivatt had said: the unseasonal bank of storms that had rolled across the plains in the past three days had caught Redmask unprepared – there could be no hiding the passage of thousands of warriors, their families, and the herds that moved with them. That, and the bloody, disastrous battle at Praedegar had shown Redmask to be fallible; indeed, it was quite possible that the masked war leader was now struggling with incipient mutiny among his people.

They needed an end to this, and soon. The supply train out of Drene had been disrupted, the cause unknown. Bivatt had this day despatched a hundred Bluerose lancers onto their back-trail, seeking out those burdened wagons and their escort. Food shortage was imminent and no army, no matter how loyal and well trained, would fight on an empty stomach. Of

course, bounteous feasts were just ahead – the herds of rodara and myrid. Battle needed to be joined. Redmask and his Awl needed to be destroyed.

A cloud scudded into their path with sleeting rain. Surprisingly cold for this late in the season. Brohl Handar and his Tiste Edur rode on, silent – this was not the rain of their homeland, nothing soft, gentle with mists. Here, the water lanced down, hard, and left one drenched in a score of heartbeats. *We are truly strangers here.*

*But in that we are not alone.*

They were finding odd cairns, bearing ghastly faces painted in white, and in the cracks and fissures of those tumuli there were peculiar offerings – tufts of wolf fur, teeth, the tusks from some unknown beast and antlers bearing rows of pecules and grooves. None of this was Awl – even the Awl scouts among Bivatt's army had never before seen the like.

Some wandering people from the eastern wastelands, perhaps, yet when Brohl had suggested that, the Atri-Preda had simply shaken her head. *She knows something. Another damned secret.*

They rode out of the rain, into steaming hot sunlight, the rich smell of soaked lichen and moss.

The broad swath of churned ground was on their right. To draw any closer was to catch the stench of manure and human faeces, a smell he had come to associate with desperation. *We fight our wars and leave in our wake the redolent reek of suffering and misery. These plains are vast, are they not? What terrible cost would we face if we just left each other alone? An end to this squabble over land – Father Shadow knows, no-one really owns it. The game of possession belongs to us, not to the rocks and earth, the grasses and the creatures walking the surface in their fraught struggle to survive.*

*A bolt of lightning descends. A wild bhederin is struck and nearly explodes, as if life itself is too much to bear.*

*The world is harsh enough. It does not need our deliberate cruelties. Our celebration of viciousness.*

His scout was returning at the gallop. Brohl Handar raised a hand to halt his troop.

The young warrior reined in with impressive grace. 'Overseer, they are on Q'uson Tapi. They did not go round it, sir – we have them!'

Q'uson Tapi, a name that was found only on the oldest Letherii maps; the words themselves were so archaic that even their meaning was unknown. The bed of a dead inland sea or vast salt lake. Flat, not a single rise or feature spanning leagues – or so the maps indicated. 'How far ahead is this Q'uson Tapi?'

The scout studied the sky, eyes narrowing on the sun to the west. 'We can reach it before dusk,' he said.

'And the Awl?'

'They were less than a league out from the old shoreline, Overseer. Where they go, there is no forage – the herds are doomed, as are the Awl themselves.'

'Has the rain reached Q'uson Tapi?'

'Not yet, but it will, and those clays will turn into slime – the great wagons will be useless against us.'

*As will cavalry on both sides, I would wager.*

'Ride back to the column,' Brohl Handar told the scout, 'and report to the Atri-Preda. We will await her at the old shoreline.'

A Letherii salute – yes, the younger Edur had taken quickly to such things – and the scout nudged his horse into motion.

*Redmask, what have you done now?*

Atri-Preda Bivatt had tried, for most of the day, to convince herself that what she had seen had been conjured from an exhausted, overwrought mind, the proclivity of the eye to find shapes in nothing, all in gleeful service to a trembling imagination. With dawn's light barely a hint in the air she had walked out, alone, to stand before a cairn – these strange

constructions they now came across as they pushed ever further east. Demonic faces in white on the flatter sides of the huge boulders. Votive offerings on niches and between the roughly stacked stones.

They had pried apart one such cairn two days earlier, finding at its core . . . very little. A single flat stone on which rested a splintered fragment of weathered wood – seemingly accidental, but Bivatt knew differently. She could recall, long ago on the north shores, on a day of fierce seas crashing that coast, a row of war canoes, their prows dismantled – and the wood, the wood was as this, here in the centre of a cairn on the Awl'dan.

Standing before this new cairn, with dawn attempting to crawl skyward as grey sheets of rain hammered down, she had happened to glance up. And saw – a darker grey, man-shaped yet huge, twenty, thirty paces away. Solitary, motionless, watching her. The blood in her veins lost all heat and all at once the rain was as cold as those thrashing seas on the north coast years past.

A gust of wind, momentarily making the wall of water opaque, and when it had passed, the figure was gone.

Alas, the chill would not leave her, the sense of gauging, almost unhuman regard.

A ghost. A shape cast by her mind, a trick of the rain and wind and dawn's uncertain birth. *But no, he was there. Watching. The maker of the cairns.*

*Redmask. Myself. The Awl and the Letherii and Tiste Edur, here we duel on this plain. Assuming we are alone in this deadly game. Witnessed by naught but carrion birds, coyotes and the antelope grazing on the valley floors that watch us pass by day after day.*

*But we are not alone.*

The thought frightened her, in a deep, childlike way – the fear born in a mind too young to cast anything away, be it dreams, nightmares, terrors or dread of all that was for ever unknowable. She felt no different now.

*There were thousands. There must have been. How, then, could they hide? How could they have hidden for so long, all this time, invisible to us, invisible to the Awl?*

*Unless Redmask knows. And now, working in league with the strangers from the sea, they prepare an ambush. Our annihilation.*

She was right to be frightened.

There would be one more battle. Neither side had anything left for more than that. And, barring more appalling displays of murderous skill from the mage-killer, Letherii sorcery would achieve victory. Brohl Handar's scout had returned with the stunning news that Redmask had led his people out onto Q'uson Tapi, and there would be no negation of magic on the flat floor of a dead sea. *Redmask forces the issue. Once we clash on Q'uson Tapi, our fates will be decided. No more fleeing, no more ambushes – even those Kechra will have nowhere to hide.*

*Errant, heed me please. If you are indeed the god of the Letherii, deliver no surprises on that day. Please. Give us victory.*

The column marched on, towards the ancient shore of a dead sea. Clouds were gathering on the horizon ahead.

Rain was thrashing down on that salt-crusted bed of clay and silt. They would fight in a quagmire, where cavalry was useless, where no horse would be quick enough to outrun a wave of deadly magic. Where warriors and soldiers would lock weapons and die where they stood, until one side stood alone, triumphant.

Soon now, they would have done with it. Done with it all.

Since noon Redmask had driven his people hard, out onto the seabed, racing ahead of the rain-clouds. A league, then two, beneath searing sun and air growing febrile with the coming storm. He had then called a halt, but the activity did not cease, and Toc Anaster had watched, bemused at first and then in growing wonder and, finally, admiration, as the Awl warriors set down weapons, divested themselves of their armour, and joined with the

elders and every other non-combatant in pulling free from the wagons the tents and every stretch of hide they could find.

And the wagons themselves were taken apart, broken down until virtually nothing remained but the huge wheels and their axles, which were then used to transport the planks of wood. Hide and canvas were stretched out, pegged down, the stakes driven flush with the ground itself. Wooden walkways were constructed, each leading back to a single, centrally positioned wagon-bed that had been left intact and raised on legs of bundled spear-shafts to create a platform.

The canvas and hides stretched in rows, with squares behind each row, linked by flattened wicker walls that had been used for hut-frames. But no-one would sleep under cover this night. No, all that took shape here served but one purpose – the coming battle. *The final battle.*

Redmask intended a defence. He invited Bivatt and her army to close with him, and to do so the Letherii and the Tiste Edur would need to march across open ground – Toc sat astride his horse, watching the frenzied preparations and occasionally glancing northwestward, to those closing stormclouds – open ground, then, that would be a sea of mud.

She might decide to wait. *I would, if I were her.* Wait until the rains had passed, until the ground hardened once again. But Toc suspected that she would not exercise such restraint. Redmask was trapped, true, but the Awl had their herds – thousands of beasts most of whom were now being slaughtered – so, Redmask could wait, his warriors well fed, whilst Bivatt and her army faced the threat of real starvation. She would need all that butchered meat, but to get to it she had to go through the Awl; she had to destroy her hated enemy.

*Besides, she might be less dismayed than Redmask would think, come the day of battle. She has her mages, after all.* Not as many as before, true, but still posing a significant threat – sufficient to win the day, in fact.

Redmask would have his warriors standing on those islands of dry ground. But such positions – with reserves on the squares behind them – offered no avenue of retreat. A final battle, then, the fates decided one way

or the other. Was this what Redmask had planned? *Hardly. Praedegar was a disaster.*

Torrent rode up. No mask of paint again, a swath of red hives spanning his forehead. 'The sea will live once more,' he said.

'Hardly,' Toc replied.

'The Letherii will drown nonetheless.'

'Those tarps, Torrent, will not stay dry for long. And then there are the mages.'

'Redmask has his Guardians for those cowards.'

'Cowards?' Toc asked, amused. 'Because they wield sorcery instead of swords?'

'And hide behind rows of soldiers, yes. They care nothing for glory. For honour.'

'True: the only thing they care about is winning. Leaving them free to talk about honour and glory afterwards. The chief spoil of the victors, that privilege.'

'You speak like one of them, Mezla. That is why I do not trust you, and so I will remain at your side during the battle.'

'My heart goes out to you – I am tasked with guarding the children, after all. We'll be nowhere close to the fighting.' *Until the fighting comes to us, which it will.*

'I shall find my glory in slitting your miserable throat, Mezla, the moment you turn to run. I see the weakness in your soul; I have seen it all along. You are broken. You should have died with your soldiers.'

'Probably. At least then I'd be spared the judgements of someone with barely a whisker on his spotty chin. Have you even lain with a woman yet, Torrent?'

The young warrior glowered for a moment, then slowly nodded. 'It is said you are quick with your barbed arrows, Mezla.'

'A metaphor, Torrent? I'm surprised at this turn to the poetic.'

'You have not listened to our songs, have you? You have made yourself deaf to the beauty of the Awl, and in your deafness you have blinded that last eye left to you. We are an ancient people, Mezla.'

'Deaf, blind, too bad I'm not yet mute.'

'You will be when I slit your throat.'

Well, Toc conceded, he had a point there.

Redmask had waited for this a long time. And no old man of the Renfayar with his damned secrets would stand poised to shatter everything. No, with his own hands Redmask had taken care of that, and he could still see in his mind that elder's face, the bulging eyes, vessels bursting, the jutting tongue as the lined face turned blue, then a deathly shade of grey above his squeezing hands. That throat had been as nothing, thin as a reed, the cartilage crumpling like a papyrus scroll in his grip. And he had found himself unable to let go, long after the fool was dead.

Too many memories of his childhood had slithered into his hands, transforming his fingers into coiling serpents that seemed not satisfied with lifeless flesh in their grip, but sought that touch of cold that came long after the soul's flight. Of course, there had been more to it than that. The elder had imagined himself Redmask's master, his overseer to use the Letherii word, standing at the war leader's shoulder, ever ready to draw breath and loose words that held terrible truths, truths that would destroy Redmask, would destroy any chance he had of leading the Awl to victory.

Yet now the time drew near. He would see Bivatt's head on a spear. He would see mud and Letherii and Tiste Edur corpses in their thousands. Crows wheeling overhead, voicing delighted cries. And he would stand on the wooden platform, witness to it all. To his scaled Guardians, who had found him, had chosen him, rending mages limb from limb, scything through enemy lines—

And the face of the elder rose once more in his mind. He had revelled in that vision, at first, but now it had begun to haunt him. A face to greet his

dreams; a face hinted at in every smear of stormcloud, the bruised grey and blue hues cold as iron filling the sky. He had thought himself rid of that fool and his cruel secrets, in that weighing look – like a father's regard on a wayward son, as if nothing the child did could be good enough, could be *Awl* in the ways of the people as they had been and would always be.

As the work continued on all sides, Redmask mounted the platform. Cadaran whip at his belt. Rygtha axe slung from its leather straps. *The weapons we were once born to, long ago. Is that not Awl enough? Am I not more Awl than any other among the Renfayar? Among the warriors gathered here? Do not look so at me, old man. You have not the right. You were never the man I have become – look at my Guardians!*

*Shall I tell you the tale, Father?*

*But no. You are dead. And I feel still your feeble neck in my hands – ah, an error. That detail belongs to the old man. Who died mysteriously in his tent. Last of the Renfayar elders, who knew, yes, knew well my father and all his kin, and the children they called their own.*

*Fool, why did you not let the years blur your memories? Why did you not become like any other doddering, hopeless ancient? What kept your eyes honed so sharp? But no longer, yes. Now you stare at stone and darkness. Now that sharp mind rots in its skull, and that is that.*

*Leave me be.*

The first spatters of rain struck him and he looked up at the sky. Hard drops, bursting against his mask, this scaled armour hiding dread truth. *I am immune. I cannot be touched. Tomorrow, we shall destroy the enemy.*

*The Guardians will see to that. They chose me, did they not? Theirs is the gift of glory, and none but me has earned such a thing.*

*By the lizard eyes of the K'Chain Che'Malle, I will have my victory.*

The deaf drummer began his arrhythmic thunder deep within the stormclouds, and the spirits of the Awl, glaring downward to the earth, began drawing their jagged swords.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

We live in waiting
For this most precious thing:
Our god with clear eyes
Who walks into the waste
Of our lives
With the bound straw
Of a broom
And with a bright smile
This god brushes into a corner
Our mess of crimes
The ragged expostulations
We spit out on the morn
With each sun's rise

We live in waiting, yes
In precious abeyance
Cold-eyed our virtues
Sowing the seeds of waste
In life's hot earth
In hand the gelid iron
Of weapons
And with bright recompense
We soak this ground
Under the clear sky
With the blood of our god
Spat out and heaved
In rigour'd disgust

*Our Waiting God*
Cormor Fural

Towers and bridges, skeletally thin and nowhere the sign of guiding hands, of intelligence or focused will. These constructs, reaching high towards the so-faint bloom of light, were entirely natural, rough of line and raw in their bony elegance. To wander their spindly feet was to overwhelm every sense of proportion, of the ways the world was supposed to look. There was no air, only water. No light, only the glow of some unnatural gift of spiritual vision. Revealing these towers and arching bridges, so tall, so thin, that they seemed but moments from toppling into the fierce, swirling currents.

Bruthen Trana, tugged loose from the flesh and bone that had been home to his entire existence, now wandered lost at the bottom of an ocean. He had not expected this. Visions and prophecies had failed them; failed Hannan Mosag especially. Bruthen had suspected that his journey would find him in a strange, unanticipated place, a realm, perhaps, of myth. A realm peopled by gods and demons, by sentinels defending long-dead demesnes with immortal stolidity.

*'Where the sun's light will not reach.'* Perhaps his memory was not perfect, but that had been the gist of that fell prophecy. And he was but a warrior of the Tiste Edur – now a warrior bereft of flesh beyond what his spirit insisted out of some wilful stubbornness, as obstinate in its conceits as any sentinel.

And so now he walked, and he could look down upon his limbs, his body; he could reach up and touch his face, feel his hair – now unbound – sweeping out on the current like strands of seaweed. He could feel the cold of the water, could feel even the immense pressure besieging him in this dark world. But there were no paths, no road, no obvious trail wending around these stone edifices.

The rotted wood of ship timbers burst into clouds beneath his feet. Clotted rivets turned underfoot. Fragments that might be bone skittered and danced along the muddy bottom, carried every which way by the currents. Dissolution seemed to be the curse of the world, of all the worlds. All that broke, all that failed, wandered down to some final resting place, lost to darkness, and this went beyond ships on the sea and the lives on those ships. Whales, dhenrabi, the tiniest crustacean. Plans, schemes and

grandiose visions. Love, faith and honour. Ambition, lust and malice. He could reach down and scoop it all into his hands, watching the water tug it away, fling it out into a swirling, momentary path of glittering glory, then gone once more.

Perhaps this was the truth he had been meant to see, assuming the presumption of his worthiness, of course – which was proving a struggle to maintain indeed. Instead, waves of despair swept over him, swept through him, spun wild out of his own soul.

He was lost.

*What am I looking for? Who am I looking for? I have forgotten. Is this a curse? Am I dead and now wandering doomed? Will these towers topple and crush me, leave me yet one more broken, mangled thing in the muck and silt?*

*I am Tiste Edur. This much I know. My true body is gone, perhaps for ever.*

And something, some force of instinct, was driving him on, step by step. There was a goal, a thing to be achieved. He would find it. He had to find it. It had to do with Hannan Mosag, who had sent him here – he did recall that, along with the faint echoes of prophecy.

Yet he felt like a child, trapped in a dream that was an endless search for a familiar face, for his mother, who was out there, unmindful of his plight, and indifferent to it had she known – for that was the heart of such fearful dreams – a heart where love is revealed to be necrotic, a lie, the deepest betrayal possible. Bruthen Trana understood these fears for what they were, for the weakness they revealed, even as he felt helpless against them.

Wandering onward, leaving, at last, those dread monuments in his wake. He might have wept for a time, although of course he could not feel his own tears – they were one with the sea around him – but he voiced muted cries, enough to make his throat raw. And at times he staggered, fell, hands plunging deep into the muck, and struggled to regain his feet, buffeted by the currents.

All of this seemed to go on for a long time.

Until something loomed out of the darkness ahead. Blockish, heaped on one side with what seemed to be detritus – drifts of wreckage, tree branches and the like. Bruthen Trana stumbled closer, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

A house. Enclosed by a low wall of the same black stone. Dead trees in the yard, their trunks thick, stubby, each rising from a root-heaved mound. A snaking path leading to three sagging, saddled steps and a recessed, narrow door. To either side of this entrance there were square windows, shuttered in strips of slate. To the right, forming a rounded corner, rose a squat, flat-topped tower. A small corniced window at the upper level was lit from within with a dull yellow glow, fitful, wavering.

*A house. On the floor of the ocean.*

*And someone is home.*

Bruthen Trana found himself standing before the gate, his eyes on the snaking path of pavestones leading to the steps. He could see blooms of silts rising from the mounds to either side, as if the mud was seething with worms. Closer now to the house, he noted the thick green slime bearding the walls, and the prevailing current – which had heaped up rubbish against one side – had done its work on the ground there as well, uprooting one of the dead trees and sculpting out the mound until it was no more than a scatter of barnacled boulders. The tree leaned against the house with unyielding branches from which algae streamed and swirled against the backwash of the current.

*This is not what I seek.* He knew that with sudden certainty. And yet . . . he glanced up once more at the tower, in time to see the light dim, as if withdrawing, then vanish.

Bruthen Trana walked onto the path.

The current seemed fiercer here, as if eager to push him off the trail, and some instinct told the Tiste Edur that losing his footing in this yard would be a bad thing. Hunching down, he pushed on.

Upon reaching the steps, Bruthen Trana was buffeted by a sudden roil of the current and he looked up to see that the door had opened. And in the threshold stood a most extraordinary figure. As tall as the Tiste Edur, yet so thin as to seem emaciated. Bone-white flesh, thin and loose, a long, narrow face, seamed with a mass of wrinkles. The eyes were pale grey, surrounding vertical pupils.

The man wore rotted, colourless silks that hid little, including the extra joints on his arms and legs, and what seemed to be a sternum horizontally hinged in the middle. The ripple of too many ribs, a set of lesser collarbones beneath the others. His hair – little more than wisps on a mottled pate – stirred like cobwebs. In one lifted hand the man held a lantern in which sat a stone that burned with golden fire.

The voice that spoke in Bruthen Trana's mind was strangely childlike. 'Is this the night for spirits?'

'Is it night then?' Bruthen Trana asked.

'Isn't it?'

'I don't know.'

'Well,' the figure replied with a smile, 'neither do I. Will you join us? The house has not had a guest for a long time.'

'I am not for this place,' Bruthen Trana said, uncertain.

'I think . . .'

'You are correct, but the repast is timely. Besides, some current must have brought you here. It is not as if just any old spirit can find the house. You have been led here, friend.'

'Why? By whom?'

'The house, of course. As to why,' the man shrugged, then stepped back and gestured. 'Join us, please. There is wine, suitably . . . dry.'

Bruthen Trana ascended the steps, and crossed the threshold.

The door closed of its own accord behind him. They were in a narrow hallway, directly ahead a T-intersection.

'I am Bruthen Trana, a Tiste Edur of—'

'Yes, yes, indeed. The Empire of the Crippled God. Well, one of them, anyway. An Emperor in chains, a people in thrall' – a quick glance over the shoulder as the man led him into the corridor to the right – 'that would be you, Edur, not the Letherii, who are in thrall to a far crueller master.'

'Coin.'

'Well done. Yes.'

They halted before a door set in a curved wall.

'This leads to the tower,' Bruthen Trana said. 'Where I first saw your light.'

'Indeed. It is, alas, the only room large enough to accommodate my guest. Oh,' he stepped closer, 'before we go in, I must warn you of some things. My guest possesses a weakness – but then, don't we all? In any case, it has fallen to me to, uh, celebrate that weakness – now, yes, soon it will end, as all things do – but not quite yet. Thus, you must not distract my dear guest from the distraction I already provide. Do you understand me?'

'Perhaps I should not enter at all, then.'

'Nonsense. It is this, Bruthen Trana. You must not speak of *dragons*. No dragons, do you understand?'

The Tiste Edur shrugged. 'That topic had not even occurred to me—'

'Oh, but in a way it has, and continues to do so. The spirit of Emurlahnis. Scabandari. Father Shadow. This haunts you, as it does all the Tiste Edur. The matter is delicate, you see. Very delicate, for both you and my guest. I must needs rely upon your restraint, or there will be trouble. Calamity, in fact.'

'I shall do my best, sir. A moment – what is your name?'

The man reached for the latch. 'My name is for no-one, Bruthen Trana. Best know me by one of my many titles. The Letherii one will do. You may

call me Knuckles.'

He lifted the latch and pushed open the door.

Within was a vast circular chamber – far too large for the modest tower's wall that Bruthen Trana had seen from outside. Whatever ceiling existed was lost in the gloom. The stone-tiled floor was fifty or more paces across. As Knuckles stepped inside, the glow from his lantern burgeoned, driving back the shadows. Opposite them, abutting the curved wall, was a raised dais on which heaps of silks, pillows and furs were scattered; and seated at the edge of that dais, leaning forward with forearms resting on thighs, was a giant. An ogre or some such demon, bearing the same hue of skin as Knuckles yet stretched over huge muscles and a robust frame of squat bones. The hands dangling down over the knees were disproportionately oversized even for that enormous body. Long, unkempt hair hung down to frame a heavy-featured face with deep-set eyes – so deep that even the lantern's light could spark but a glimmer in those ridge-shelved pits.

'My guest,' Knuckles murmured. 'Kilmandaros. Most gentle, I assure you, Bruthen Trana. When . . . distracted. Come, she is eager to meet you.'

They approached, footfalls echoing in this waterless chamber. Knuckles shifted his route slightly towards a low marble table on which sat a dusty bottle of wine. 'Beloved,' he called to Kilmandaros, 'see who the house has brought to us!'

'Stuff it with food and drink and send it on its way,' the huge woman said in a growl. 'I am on the trail of a solution, scrawny whelp of mine.'

Bruthen Trana could now see, scattered on the tiles before Kilmandaros, a profusion of small bones, each incised in patterns on every available surface. They seemed arrayed without order, nothing more than rubbish spilled out from some bag, yet Kilmandaros was frowning down at them with savage concentration.

'The solution,' she repeated.

'How exciting,' Knuckles said, procuring from somewhere a third goblet into which he poured amber wine. 'Double or nothing, then?'

'Oh yes, why not? But you owe me the treasuries of a hundred thousand empires already, dear Setch—'

'Knuckles, my love.'

'Dear Knuckles.'

'I am certain it is you who owes me, Mother.'

'For but a moment longer,' she replied, now rubbing those huge hands together. 'I am so close. You were a fool to offer double or nothing.'

'Ah, my weakness,' Knuckles sighed as he walked over to Bruthen Trana with the goblet. Meeting the Tiste Edur's eyes, Knuckles winked. 'The grains run the river, Mother,' he said. 'Best hurry with your solution.'

A fist thundered on the dais. 'Do not make me nervous!'

The echoes of that impact were long in fading.

Kilmandaros leaned still further, glowering down at the array of bones. 'The pattern,' she whispered, 'yes, almost there. Almost . . .'

'I feel magnanimous,' Knuckles said, 'and offer to still those grains . . . for a time. So that we may be true hosts to our new guest.'

The giant woman looked up, a sudden cunning in her expression. 'Excellent idea, Knuckles. Make it so!'

A gesture, and the wavering light of the lantern ceased its waver. All was still in a way Bruthen Trana could not define – after all, nothing had changed. And yet his soul knew, somehow, that the grains Knuckles had spoken of were *time*, its passage, its unending journey. He had just, with a single gesture of one hand, stopped time.

At least in this chamber. Surely not everywhere else. And yet . . .

Kilmandaros leaned back with a satisfied smirk and fixed her small eyes on Bruthen Trana. 'I see,' she said. 'The house anticipates.'

'We are as flitting dreams to the Azath,' Knuckles said. 'Yet, even though we are but momentary conceits, as our sorry existence might well be

defined, we have our uses.'

'Some of us,' Kilmandaros said, suddenly dismissive, 'prove more useful than others. This Tiste Edur' – a wave of one huge, scarred hand – 'is of modest value by any measure.'

'The Azath see what we do not, in each of us. Perhaps, Mother, in *all* of us.'

A sour grunt. 'You think this house let me go of its own will – proof of your gullibility, Knuckles. Not even the Azath could hold me for ever.'

'Extraordinary,' Knuckles said, 'that it held you at all.'

This exchange, Bruthen Trana realized, was an old one, following well-worn ruts between the two.

'Would never have happened,' Kilmandaros said under her breath, 'if he'd not betrayed me—'

'Ah, Mother. I have no particular love for Anomander Purake, but let us be fair here. He did not betray you. In fact, it was *you* who jumped *him* from behind—'

'Anticipating his betrayal!'

'Anomander does not break his word, Mother. Never has, never will.'

'Tell that to Osserc—'

'Also in the habit of "anticipating" Anomander's imminent betrayal.'

'What of Draconus?'

'What of him, Mother?'

Kilmandaros rumbled something then, too low for Bruthen Trana to catch.

Knuckles said, 'Our Tiste Edur guest seeks the place of Names.'

Bruthen Trana started. *Yes!* It was true – a truth he had not even known before just this moment, before Knuckle's quiet words. *The place of Names. The Names of the Gods.*

'There will be trouble, then,' Kilmandaros said, shifting in agitation, her gaze drawn again and again to the scatter of bones. 'He must remember this house, then. The path – every step – he must remember, or he will wander lost for all time. And with him, just as lost as they have ever been, the names of every forgotten god.'

'His spirit is strong,' Knuckles said, then faced Bruthen Trana and smiled. 'Your spirit is strong. Forgive me – we often forget entirely the outside world, even when, on rare occasions such as this one, that world *intrudes*.'

The Tiste Edur shrugged. His head was spinning. *The place of Names.* 'What will I find there?' he asked.

'He forgets already,' Kilmandaros muttered.

'The path,' Knuckles answered. 'More than that, actually. But when all is done – for you, in that place – you must recall the path, Bruthen Trana, and you must walk it without a sliver of doubt.'

'But, Knuckles, all my life, I have walked no path without a sliver of doubt – more than a sliver, in fact—'

'Surprising,' Kilmandaros cut in, 'for a child of Scabandari—'

'I must begin the grains again,' Knuckles suddenly announced. 'Into the river – the pattern, Mother, it calls to you once more.'

She swore in some unknown language, bent to scowl down at the bones. 'I was there,' she muttered. 'Almost there – so close, so—'

A faint chime echoed in the chamber.

Her fist thundered again on the dais, and this time the echoes seemed unending.

At a modest signal from Knuckles, Bruthen Trana drained the fine wine and set the goblet down on the marble tabletop.

It was time to leave.

Knuckles led Bruthen Trana back into the corridor. A final glance back into that airy chamber and the Tiste Edur saw Kilmandaros, hands on knees,

staring directly at him with those faintly glittering eyes, like two lone, dying stars in the firmament. Chilled to the depths of his heart, Bruthen Trana pulled his gaze away and followed the son of Kilmandaros back to the front door.

At the threshold, he paused for a moment to search Knuckles's face. 'The game you play with her – tell me, does such a pattern exist?'

Brows arched. 'In the casting of bones? Damned if I know.' A sudden smile, then. 'Our kind, ah, but we *love* patterns.'

'Even if they don't exist?'

'Don't they?' The smile grew mischievous. 'Go, Bruthen Trana, and mind the path. Always mind the path.'

The Tiste Edur walked down onto the pavestones. 'I would,' he muttered, 'could I find it.'

Forty paces from the house, he turned to look upon it, and saw nothing but swirling currents, spinning silts in funnels.

*Gone. As if I had imagined the entire thing.*

*But I was warned, wasn't I? Something about a path.*

*'Remember . . .'*

Lost. Again. Memories tugged free, snatched away by the ferocious winds of water.

He swung round again and set off, staggering, step by step, towards something he could not dredge up from his mind, could not even imagine. Was this where life ended? In some hopeless quest, some eternal search for a lost dream?

*Remember the path. Oh, Father Shadow, remember . . . something. Anything.*

* * *

Where the huge chunks of ice had been, there were now stands of young trees. Alder, aspen, dogwood, forming a tangled fringe surrounding the dead Meckros City. Beyond the trees were the grasses of the plains, among them deep-rooted bluestems and red-lipped poppies that cloaked the burial mounds where resided the bones of thousands of people.

The wreckage of buildings still stood here and there on their massive pylons of wood, while others had tilted, then toppled, spilling out their contents onto canted streets. Weeds and shrubs now grew everywhere, dotting the enormous, sprawling ruin, and among the broken bones of buildings lay a scatter of flowers, a profusion of colours on all sides.

He stood, balanced on a fallen pillar of dusty marble allowing him a view of the vista, the city stretching to his left, the ragged edge and green-leafed trees with the mounds beyond on his right. His eyes, a fiery amber, were fixed on something on the far horizon directly ahead. His broad mouth held its habitual downturn at the corners, an expression that seemed ever at war with the blazing joy within his eyes. *His mother's eyes*, it was said. But somehow less fierce and this, perhaps, was born of his father's uneasy gift – a mouth that did not expect to smile, ever.

His second father, his true father. The thread of blood. The one who had visited in his seventh week of life. Yes, while it had been a man named Araq Elalle who had raised him, whilst he lived in the Meckros City, it had been the other – the stranger in the company of a yellow-haired bonecaster – who had given his seed to Menandore, Rud Elalle's mother. His Imass minders had not been blind to such truths, and oh how Menandore had railed at them afterwards.

*'I took all that I needed from Udinaas! And left him a husk and nothing more. He can never sire another child – a husk! A useless mortal – forget him, my son. He is nothing.'* And from the terrible demand in her blazing eyes, her son had recoiled.

Rud Elalle was tall now, half a hand taller than even his mother. His hair, long and wild in the fashion of the Bentract Imass warriors, was a sun-bleached brown. He wore a cloak of ranag hide, deep brown and amber-tipped the fur. Beneath that was a supple leather shirt of deerskin. His

leggings were of thicker, tougher allish hide. On his feet were ranag leather moccasins that reached to just below his knees.

A scar ran down the right side of his neck, gift of a boar's dying lunge. The bones of his left wrist had been broken and were now misaligned, the places of the breaks knotted protrusions bound in thick sinews, but the arm had not been weakened by this; indeed, it was now stronger than its opposite. Menandore's gift, that strange response to any injury, as if his body sought to armour itself against any chance of the same injury's recurring. There had been other breaks, other wounds – life among the Imass was hard, and though they would have protected him from its rigour, he would not permit that. He was among the Bentract, he was of the Bentract. Here, with these wondrous people, he had found love and fellowship. He would live as they lived, for as long as he could.

Yet, alas, he felt now . . . that time was coming to an end. His eyes remained fixed on that distant horizon, even as he sensed her arrival, now at his side. 'Mother,' he said.

'Imass,' she said. 'Speak our own language, my son. Speak the language of dragons.'

Faint distaste soured Rud Elalle. 'We are not Eleint, Mother. That blood is stolen. Impure—'

'We are no less children of Starvald Demelain. I do not know who has filled your mind with these doubts. But they are weaknesses, and now is not the time.'

'Now is not the time,' he repeated.

She snorted. 'My sisters.'

'Yes.'

'They want me. They want him. Yet, in both schemes, they have not counted you a threat, my son. Oh, they know you are grown now. They know the power within you. But they know nothing of your will.'

'Nor, Mother, do you.'

He heard her catch her breath, was inwardly amused at the suddenly crowded silence that followed.

He nodded to the far horizon. 'Do you see them, Mother?'

'Unimportant. Mayhap they will survive, but I would not wager upon it. Understand me, Rud, with what is to come, not one of us is safe. Not one. You, me, your precious Bentract—'

He turned at that, and his eyes were all at once a mirror of his mother's – bright with rage and menace.

She very nearly flinched, and he saw that and was pleased. 'I will permit no harm to come to them, Mother. You wish to understand my will. Now you do.'

'Foolish. No, insanity. They are not even alive—'

'In their minds, they are. In my mind, Mother, they are.'

She sneered. 'Do the new ones now among the Bentract hold to such noble faith, Rud? Have you not seen their disdain? Their contempt for their own deluded kin? It is only a matter of time before one of them speaks true – shattering the illusion for all time—'

'They will not,' Rud said, once more eyeing the distant party of wanderers who were now, without question, approaching the ruined city. 'You do not visit often enough,' he said. 'Disdain and contempt, yes, but now, too, you will see fear.'

'Of you? Oh, my son, you fool! And do your adopted kin know to guard your back against them? Of course not, for that would reveal too much, would invite awkward questions – and the Imass are not ones to be easily turned away when seeking truth.'

'My back will be guarded,' Rud said.

'By whom?'

'Not you, Mother?'

She hissed in a most reptilian manner. 'When? While my sisters are busy trying to kill me? When he has the Finnest in his hand and casts eyes upon all of us?'

'If not you,' he said easily, 'then someone else.'

'Wiser to kill the newcomers now, Rud.'

'And my kin would have no questions then?'

'None but you alive to answer, and you of course may tell them anything you care to. Kill those new Imass, those strangers with their sly regard, and be quick about it.'

'I think not.'

'Kill them, or I will.'

'No, Mother. The Imass are mine. Shed blood among my people – any of them – and you will stand alone the day Sukul and Sheltatha arrive, the day of Silchas Ruin who comes to claim the Finnest.' He glanced across at her. Could white skin grow still paler? 'Yes, all in a single day. I have been to the Twelve Gates – maintaining my vigil as you have asked.'

'And?' The query was almost breathless.

'Kurald Galain is most perturbed.'

'They draw close?'

'You know that as well as I do – my father is with them, is he not? You steal his eyes when it suits you—'

'Not as easy as you think.' Her tone was genuine in its bitterness. 'He . . . baffles me.'

*Frightens you, you mean.* 'Silchas Ruin will demand the Finnest.'

'Yes, he will! And we both know what he will do with it – *and that must not be permitted!* '

*Are you sure of that, Mother? Because, you see, I am not. Not any more.* 'Silchas Ruin may well demand. He may well make dire threats, Mother.

You have said so often enough.'

'And if we stand side by side, my son, he cannot hope to get past us.'

'Yes.'

'*But who will be guarding your back?* '

'Enough, Mother. I warned them to silence and I do not think they will attempt anything. Call it faith – not in the measure of their fear. Instead, my faith rests in the measure of . . . wonder.'

She stared at him, clearly confused.

He felt no inclination to elaborate. She would see, in time. 'I would go to welcome these new ones,' he said, eyes returning to the approaching strangers. 'Will you join me, Menandore?'

'You must be mad.' Words filled with affection – yes, she could never rail at him for very long. Something of his father's ethereal ease, perhaps – an ease even Rud himself could remember from that single, short visit. An ease that would slip over the Letherii's regular, unimpressive features, whenever the wave of pain, dismay – or indeed any harsh emotion – was past and gone, leaving not a ripple in its wake.

That ease, Rud now understood, was the true face of Udinaas. The face of his soul.

*Father, I do so look forward to seeing you again.*

His mother was gone – at least from his side. At a sudden gust of wind Rud Elalle glanced up and saw the white and gold mass of her dragon form, lurching skyward with every heave of the huge wings.

The strangers had all halted, still three hundred paces away, and were staring up, now, as Menandore lunged yet higher, slid across currents of air for a moment, until she faced them, and then swept down, straight for the small party. Oh, how she loved to intimidate lesser beings.

What happened then without doubt surprised Menandore more than even Rud – who gave an involuntary shout of surprise as two feline shapes

launched into the air from the midst of the party. Dog-sized, forelegs lashing upward as Rud's mother sailed overhead – and she snapped her hind legs up tight against her belly in instinctive alarm, even as a thundering beat of her wings lifted her out of harm's way. At sight of her neck twisting round, eyes flashing in an outraged glare – indignant indeed – Rud Elalle laughed, and was satisfied to see that the sound reached his mother, enough to draw her glare and hold it, until the dragon's momentum carried her well past the strangers and their defiant pets, out of the moment when she might have banked hard, jaws hingeing open to unleash deadly magic down on the obstreperous emlava and their masters.

The threat's balance tilted away – as Rud had sought with that barking laugh – and on she flew, dismissing all in her wake, including her son.

And, were it in his nature, he would then have smiled. For he knew his mother was smiling, now. Delighted to have so amused her only son, her child who, like any Imass, saved his laughter for the wounds his body received in the ferocious games of living. And even her doubts, etched in by this conversation just past, would smooth themselves over for a time.

A little time. When they returned, Rud also knew, they would sting like fire. But by then, it would be too late. *More or less.*

He climbed down from the toppled column. It was time to meet the strangers.

'That,' Hedge announced, 'is no Imass. Unless they breed 'em big round here.'

'Not kin,' Onrack observed with narrowed eyes.

Hedge's ghostly heart was still pounding hard in his ghostly chest in the wake of that damned dragon. If it hadn't been for the emlava cubs and their brainless lack of fear, things might well have got messy. A cusser in Hedge's left hand. Quick Ben with a dozen snarly warrens he might well have let loose all at once. Trull Sengar and his damned spears – *aye, dragon steaks raining down from the sky.*

*Unless she got us first.*

No matter, the moment had passed, and he was thankful for that. 'Maybe he's no kin, Onrack, but he dresses like an Imass, and those are stone chips at the business end of that bone club he's carrying.' Hedge glanced across at Quick Ben – feeling once again the surge of delight upon seeing a familiar face, the face of a friend – and said, 'I wish Fid was here, because just looking at that man has the hairs standing on the back of my neck.'

'If you've already got a bad feeling about this,' the wizard replied, 'why do you need Fid?'

'Confirmation, is why. The bastard was talking to a woman, who then veered into a dragon and thought to give us a scare. Anybody keeping scaly company makes me nervous.'

'Onrack,' said Trull Sengar as the man drew closer, walking with a casual, almost loose stride, 'I think we approach the place where Cotillion wanted us to be.'

At that, Hedge scowled. 'Speaking of scaly – dealing with Shadowthrone's lackey makes all this stink even worse—'

'Leaving once more unspoken the explanation for what you're doing here, Hedge,' the Tiste Edur replied with a faint smile at the sapper – that damned smile, so bloody disarming that Hedge almost spilled out every secret in his head, just to see that smile grow into something more welcoming. Trull Sengar was like that, inviting friendship and camaraderie like the sweet scent of a flower – probably a poisonous one – *but that might be just me. My usual paranoia. Well earned, mind. Still, there doesn't seem to be anything poisonous about Trull Sengar.*

*It's just that I don't trust nice people. There, it's said – at least here in my head. And no, I don't need any Hood-kissed reason either.* He stepped too close to one of the emlava cubs and had to dance away to avoid lashing talons. He glared at the hissing creature. 'Your hide's mine, you know that? Mine, kitty. Take good care of it in the meantime.'

The eyes burned up at him, and the emlava cub opened wide its jaws to loose yet another whispering hiss.

*Damn, those fangs are getting long.*

Onrack had moved out ahead, and now the Imass stopped. Moments later they had all drawn up to stand a few paces behind him.

The tall, wild-haired warrior walked closer. Five paces from Onrack he halted, smiled and said something in some guttural language.

Onrack cocked his head. 'He speaks Imass.'

'Not Malazan?' Hedge asked with mock incredulity. 'What's wrong with the damned fool?'

The man's smile broadened, those amber nugget eyes fixing on Hedge, and in Malazan he said, 'All the children of the Imass tongue are as poetry to this damned fool. As are the languages of the Tiste,' he added, gaze shifting to Trull Sengar. Then he spread his hands out to the sides, palms exposed. 'I am Rud Elalle, raised among the Bentract Imass as a child of their own.'

Onrack said, 'They have yet to show themselves, Rud Elalle. This is not the welcome I expected from kin.'

'You have been watched, yes, for some time. Many clans. Ulshun Pral sent out word that none were to block your path.' Rud Elalle looked down at the tethered cubs to either side of Trull Sengar. 'The ay flee your scent, and now I see why.' He then lowered his hands and stepped back. 'I have given you my name.'

'I am Onrack, of Logros T'lan Imass. The one who restrains the emlava is Trull Sengar, Tiste Edur of the Hiroth tribe. The dark-skinned man is Ben Adaephon Delat, born in a land called Seven Cities; and his companion is Hedge, once a soldier of the Malazan Empire.'

Rud's eyes found Hedge again. 'Tell me, soldier, do you bleed?'

'What?'

'You were dead, yes? A spirit willing itself the body it once possessed. But now you are here. Do you bleed?'

Bemused, Hedge looked to Quick Ben. 'What's he mean? Like a woman bleeds? I'm too ugly to be a woman, Quick.'

'Forgive me,' Rud Elalle said. 'Onrack proclaims himself a T'lan Imass – yet here he stands, clothed in flesh and bearing the scars of your journey in this realm. And there have been other such guests. T'lan Imass – lone wanderers who have found this place – and they too are clothed in flesh.'

'Other guests?' Hedge asked. 'You almost had one more of those, and she would have been a viper in your midst, Rud Elalle. For what it's worth, I wouldn't be trusting those other T'lan Imass, were I you.'

'Ulshun Pral is a wise leader,' Rud answered with another smile.

'I'm still a ghost,' Hedge said.

'Are you?'

The sapper frowned. 'Well, I ain't gonna cut myself to find out one way or the other.'

'Because you intend to leave this place, eventually. Of course, I understand.'

'Sounds like you do at that,' Hedge snapped. 'So, maybe you live with these Bentract Imass, Rud Elalle, but that's about as far as this kinship thing goes. So, who are you?'

'A friend,' the man replied with yet another smile.

*Aye, and if you knew how I felt about friendly people.*

'You have given me your names, and so now I welcome you among the Bentract Imass. Come, Ulshun Pral is eager to meet you.'

He set off.

They followed. With hand signals, Hedge drew Quick Ben closer to his side and they dropped back a bit from the others. The sapper spoke in very low tones. 'That furry tree's standing on the ruins of a dead city, Quick, like he was its Hood-damned prince.'

'A Meckros City,' the wizard murmured.

'Aye, I guessed as much. So where's the ocean? Glad I never saw the wave that carried it here.'

Quick Ben snorted. 'Gods and Elder Gods, Hedge. Been here kicking pieces around, I'd wager. And, just maybe, a Jaghut or two. There's a real mess of residual magic in this place – not just Imass. More Jaghut than Imass, in fact. And . . . other stuff.'

'Quick Ben Delat, lucid as a piss-hole.'

'You really want to know why Cotillion sent us here?'

'No. Just knowing snares me in his web and I ain't gonna dance for any god.'

'And I do, Hedge?'

The sapper grinned. 'Aye, but you dance, and then you *dance*.'

'Rud has a point, by the way.'

'No, he has a club.'

'About you bleeding.'

'Hood above, Quick—'

'Oh, now that's a giveaway, Hedge. What's Hood doing "above"? Just how deep was that hole you crawled out of? And more important, why?'

'My company soured already? I liked you least, you know. Even Trotts—'

'Now who's dancing?'

'Better we know nothing about why we're here, is what I'm trying to say.'

'Relax. I have already figured you out, Hedge, and here's something that might surprise you. Not only do I have no problem with you being here – neither does Cotillion.'

'Bastard! What – you and Cotillion sending pigeons back and forth on all this?'

'I'm not saying Cotillion knows anything about you, Hedge. I'm just saying that if he did, he'd be fine. So would Shadowthrone—'

'Gods below!'

'Calm down!'

'Around you, Quick, that's impossible. Always was, always will be! Hood, I'm a ghost and I'm *still* nervous!'

'You never were good at being calm, were you? One would think dying might have changed you, some, but I guess not.'

'Funny. Ha ha.'

They were now skirting the ruined city, and came within sight of the burial mounds. Quick Ben grunted. 'Looks like the Meckros didn't survive the kick.'

'Dead or no,' Hedge said, 'you'd be nervous too if you was carrying a sack of cussers on your back.'

'Damn you, Hedge – that *was* a cusser in your hand back there! When the dragon—'

'Aye, Quick, so you just keep them kitties away from me, lest I jump back and turn an ankle or something. And stop talking about Shadowthrone and Cotillion, too.'

'A sack full of cussers. Now I *am* nervous – you may be dead, but I'm not!'

'Just so.'

'I wish Fid was here, too. Instead of you.'

'That's not a very nice thing to say! You're hurting my feelings. Anyway. What I was wanting to tell you was about that T'lan Imass I was travelling with, for a time.'

'What happened to it? Let me guess, you tossed it a cusser.'

'Damned right I did, Quick. She was trailing chains, big ones.'

'Crippled God?'

'Aye. Everyone wants in on this game here.'

'That'd be a mistake,' the wizard asserted as they walked towards a series of rock outcroppings behind which rose thin tendrils of hearth smoke. 'The Crippled God would find himself seriously outclassed.'

'Think highly of yourself, don't you? Some things never change.'

'Not me, idiot. I meant the dragon. Menandore. Rud Elalle's mother.'

Hedge dragged the leather cap from his head and pulled at what was left of his hair. 'This is what drives me mad! You! Things like that, just dropped out like a big stinking lump of – ow!' He let go of his hair. 'Hey, that actually hurt!'

'Tug hard enough to bleed, Hedge?'

Hedge glared across at the wizard, who was now smirking. 'Look, Quick, this would all be fine if I was planning on building a homestead here, planting a few tubers and raising emlava for their cuddly fur or something. But damn it, I'm just passing through, right? And when I come out the other side, well, I'm back being a ghost, and that's something I need to get used to, and *stay* used to.'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'Just stop pulling your hair and you'll be fine, then.'

The emlava cubs had grown and were now strong enough to pull Trull Sengar off balance as they strained on their leather leashes, their attention fixed yet again on the Malazan soldier named Hedge, for whom they had acquired a mindless hate. Trull leaned forward to drag the beasts along – it always worked better when the sapper walked ahead, rather than lagging back as he was doing now.

Onrack, noting his struggles, turned and quickly clouted both cubs on their flat foreheads. Suitably cowed, the two emlava ceased their efforts and padded along, heads lowered.

'Their mother would do the same,' Onrack said.

'The paw of discipline,' Trull said, smiling. 'I wonder if we might believe the same for our guide here.'

Rud Elalle was ten paces ahead of them – perhaps he could hear, perhaps not.

'Yes, they share blood,' Onrack said, nodding. 'That much was clear when they were standing side by side. And if there is Eleint blood in the mother, then so too in the son.'

'Soletaken?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder if he anticipated this complication?' Trull meant Cotillion when saying *he*.

'Unknown,' Onrack replied, understanding well enough. 'The task awaiting us grows ever less certain. Friend Trull, I fear for these Imass. For this entire realm.'

'Leave the wizard and his sapper to address our benefactor's needs, then, and we will concern ourselves with protecting this place, and your kin who call it home.'

The Imass glanced across with narrowed eyes. 'You say this, with such ease?'

'The wizard, Onrack, is the one who needs to be here. His power – he will be our benefactor's hand in what is to come. You and me, we were but his escort, his bodyguards, if you will.'

'You misunderstand me, Trull Sengar. My wonder is in your willingness to risk your life, again. This time for a people who are nothing to you. For a realm not your own.'

'They are your kin, Onrack.'

'Distant. Bentract.'

'If it had been, say, the Den-Ratha tribe of the Edur to gain supremacy among our tribes, Onrack, instead of my own Hiroth, would I not give my

life to defend them? They are still my people. For you it is the same, yes? Logros, Bentract – just tribes – but the same people.'

'There is too much within you, Trull Sengar. You humble me.'

'Perhaps there lies your own misunderstanding, friend.

Perhaps all you see here is my search for a cause, for something to fight for, to die for.'

'You will not die here.'

'Oh, Onrack—'

'I may well fight to protect the Bentract and this realm, but they are not why I am here. You are.'

Trull could not meet his friend's eyes, and in his heart there was pain. Deep, old, awakened.

'The son,' Onrack said after a moment, 'seems . . . very young.'

'Well, so am I.'

'Not when I look into your eyes. It is not the same with this Soletaken,' he continued, seemingly unmindful of the wound he had just delivered. 'No, those yellow eyes are *young*.'

'Innocent?'

A nod. 'Trusting, as a child is trusting.'

'A gentle mother, then.'

'She did not raise him,' Onrack said.

*Ah, the Imass, then. And now I begin to see, to understand.* 'We will be vigilant, Onrack.'

'Yes.'

Rud Elalle led them into a split between two upthrust knobs of layered rock, a trail that then wound between huge boulders before opening out into the Imass village.

Rock shelters along a cliff. Tusk-framed huts, the spindly frames of drying racks on which were stretched hides. Children running like squat imps in the midst of a gathering of perhaps thirty Imass. Men, women, elders. One warrior stood before all the others, while off to one side stood three more Imass, their garb rotted and subtly different in cut and style from that of the Bentract – the strangers, Trull realized – guests yet remaining apart.

Upon seeing them, Onrack's benign expression hardened. 'Friend,' he murmured to Trull, ' 'ware those three.'

'I decided the same myself,' Trull replied under his breath.

Rud Elalle moved to stand at the Bentract leader's side. 'This is Ulshun Pral,' he said, setting a hand on the man's thick shoulder – a gesture of open affection that seemed blissfully unmindful of the growing tension at the edge of this village.

Onrack moved forward. 'I am Onrack the Broken, once of the Logros T'lan Imass, child of the Ritual. I ask that we be made guests among your tribe, Ulshun Pral.'

The honey-skinned warrior frowned over at Rud Elalle, then said something in his own language.

Rud nodded and faced Onrack. 'Ulshun Pral asks that you speak in the First Language.'

'He asked,' Onrack said, 'why I chose not to.'

'Yes.'

'My friends do not share the knowing of that language. I cannot ask for guesting on their behalf without their understanding, for to be guest is to be bound to the rules of the tribe, and this they must know, before I would venture a promise of peace on their behalf.'

'Can you not simply translate?' Rud Elalle asked.

'Of course, yet I choose to leave that to you, Rud Elalle, for Ulshun Pral knows and trusts you, while he does not know me.'

'Very well, I shall do so.'

'Enough with all this,' Hedge called out, gingerly setting down his pack. 'We'll all be good boys, so long as no-one tries to kill us or worse, like making us eat some horrible vegetable rightly extinct on every other realm in the universe.'

Rud Elalle was displaying impressive skill and translating Hedge's words almost as fast as the sapper spoke them.

Ulshun Pral's brows lifted in seeming astonishment, then he turned and with a savage gesture yelled at a small crowd of elderly women at one side of the crowd.

Hedge scowled at Onrack, 'Now what did I say?' he demanded.

But Trull saw his friend smiling. 'Ulshun Pral has just directed the cooks to fish the baektar from the stew they have prepared for us.'

'The baek-what?'

'A vegetable, Hedge, that will be found nowhere but here.'

All at once the tension was gone. There were smiles, shouts of apparent welcome from other Imass, and many came forward to close, first on Onrack, and then – with expressions of delight and wonder, on Trull Sengar – no, he realized, not on him – *on the emlava cubs*. Who began purring deep in their throats, as thick, short-fingered hands reached out to stroke fur and scratch behind the small, tufted ears.

'Look at that, Quick!' Hedge was staring in disbelief.

'Now is that fair?'

The wizard slapped the sapper on the back. 'It's true, Hedge, the dead stink.'

'You're hurting my feelings again!'

Sighing, Trull released the leather leashes and stepped back. He smiled across at Hedge. 'I smell nothing untoward,' he said.

But the soldier's scowl only deepened. 'Maybe I like you now, Trull Sengar, but you keep being nice and that'll change, I swear it.'

'Have I offended you—'

'Ignore Hedge,' Quick Ben cut in, 'at least when he's talking. Trust me, it was the only way the rest of us in the squad stayed sane. Ignore him . . . until he reaches into that damned sack of his.'

'And then?' Trull asked in complete bewilderment.

'Then run like Hood himself was on your heels.'

Onrack had separated himself from his welcomers and was now walking towards the strangers.

'Yes,' Quick Ben said in a low voice. 'They're trouble indeed.'

'Because they were like Onrack? T'lan Imass?'

'Of the Ritual, aye. The question is, why are they here?'

'I would imagine that whatever mission brought them to this place, Quick Ben, the transformation they experienced has shaken them – perhaps, as with Onrack, their spirits have reawakened.'

'Well, they look unbalanced enough.'

Their conversation with Onrack was short, and Trull watched as his old friend approached.

'Well?' the wizard demanded.

Onrack was frowning. 'They are Bentract, after all. But from those who joined the Ritual. Ulshun Pral's clan were among the very few who did not, who were swayed by the arguments set forth by Kilava Onass – this is why,' Onrack added, 'they greet the emlava as if they were Kilava's very own children. Thus, there are ancient wounds between the two groups. Ulshun Pral was not a clan chief back then – indeed, the T'lan Bentract do not even know him.'

'And that is a problem?'

'It is, because one of the strangers is a chosen chief – chosen by Bentract himself. Hostille Rator.'

'And the other two?' Quick Ben asked.

'Yes, even more difficult. Ulshun Pral's Bonecaster is gone. Til'aras Benok and Gr'istanas Ish'ilm, who stand to either side of Hostille Rator, are Bonecasters.'

Trull Sengar drew a deep breath. 'They contemplate usurpation, then.'

Onrack the Broken nodded.

'Then what had stopped them?' Quick Ben asked.

'Rud Elalle, wizard. The son of Menandore terrifies them.'

The rain thundered down, every moment another hundred thousand iron-tipped lances crashing down out of the dark onto slate rooftops, exploding on the cobbled streets where streams now rushed down, racing for the harbour.

The ice north of the island had not died quietly. Sundered by the magic of a wilful child, the white and blue mountains had lifted skyward in pillars of steam that roiled into massive stormclouds, which had then marched south freed from the strictures of refusal, and those clouds now erupted over the beleaguered city with rage and vengeance. Late afternoon had become midnight and now, as the half-drowned chimes of midnight's bells sounded, it seemed as if this night would never end.

On the morrow – if it ever came – the Adjunct would set sail with her motley fleet. Thrones of War, a score of well-armed fast escorts, the last of the transports holding the rest of the Fourteenth Army, and one sleek black dromon propelled by the tireless oars manned by headless Tiste Andii. Oh, and of course, in the lead would be a local pirate's ship, captained by a dead woman – but never mind her. Return, yes, to that black-hulled nightmare.

Their hosts had worked hard to keep the dread truth of that Quon dromon from Nimander Golit and his kin. The severed heads on the deck, mounded around the mainmast, well, they had kept them covered. No point in

encouraging hysteria, should their living Tiste Andii guests see the faces of their kin, their true kin, for were they not of Drift Avalii? Oh yes, they were indeed. Uncles, fathers, mothers, oh, a play on words now would well serve the notion – they were, yes, heads of families, cut away before their time, before their children had grown old enough, wise enough, hard enough to survive in this world. Cut away, ha ha. Now, death would have been one thing. Dying was one thing. Just one and there were other things, always, and you didn't need any special wisdom to know that. But those heads had not died, not stiffened then softened with rot. The faces had not fallen away to leave just bone, just the recognition that came with a sharing of what-is, what-was and what-would-be. No, the eyes stared on, the eyes blinked because some memory told them that blinking was necessary. The mouths moved, resuming interrupted conversations, the sharing of jests, the gossip of parents, yet not a single word could claw free.

But hysteria was a complicated place in which a young mind might find itself. It could be deafening with screams, shrieks, the endless bursts of horror again and again and again – a tide surging without end. Or it could be quiet – silent in that awful way of some silences – like that of gaping mouths, desperate but unable to draw breath, the eyes above bulging, the veins standing prominent in their need, but no breath would come, nothing to slide life into the lungs. This was the hysteria of drowning. Drowning inside oneself, inside horror. The hysteria of a child, blank-eyed, drool smearing the chin.

Some secrets were impossible to keep. The truth of that ship, for one. The *Silanda*'s lines were known, were profoundly familiar. The ship that had taken their parents on a pathetic journey in search of the one whom every Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii called Father. Anomander Rake. Anomander of the silver hair, the dragon's eyes. Didn't find him, alas. Never the chance to plead for help, to ask all the questions that needed asking, to stab fingers in accusation, condemnation, damnation. All that, yes yes.

Take to your oars, brave parents, there is more sea to cross. Can you see the shore? Of course not. You see the sunlight when there is sunlight through canvas weave, and in your heads you feel the ache of your bodies, the strain in your shoulders, the bunch and loose, bunch and loose of every

draw on the sweeps. You feel the blood welling up to pool in the neck as if it was a gilded cup, only to sink back down again. *Row, damn you! Row for the shore!*

Aye, the shore. Other side of this ocean, and this ocean, dear parents, is endless.

*So row! Row!*

He might have giggled, but that would be a dangerous thing, to break the silence of his hysteria, which he had held on to for so long now it had become warm as a mother's embrace.

Best to carry on, working to push away, shut away, all thought of the *Silanda*. Easier on land, in this inn, in this room.

But, on the morrow, they would sail. Again. Onto the ships, oh the spray and wind enlivens so!

And this was why, on this horrid night of vengeful rain, Nimander was awake. For he knew Phaed. He knew Phaed's own stain of hysteria, and what it might lead her to do. Tonight, in the sodden ashes of midnight's bell.

She could make her footfalls very quiet, as she crept out of her bed and padded barefoot to the door. *Blessed sister blessed daughter blessed mother blessed aunt, niece, grandmother – blessed kin, blood of my blood, spit of my spit, gall of my gall. I hear you.*

*For I know your mind, Phaed. The ever-surging bursts in your soul – yes, I see your bared teeth, the smear of intent. You imagine yourself unseen, yes, unwitnessed, and so you reveal your raw self. There in that blessed slash of grey-white, so poetically echoed by the gleam of the knife in your hand.*

To the door, darling Phaed. Lift the latch, and out you go, to slide down the corridor all slithering limbs as the rain lashes the roof above and water trickles down the walls in dirty tears. Cold enough to see your breath, Phaed, reminding you not just that you are alive, but that you are sexually awakened; that this journey is the sweetest indulgence of under-the-cover secrets, fingers ever playful on the knife, and on the rocking ship in the

harbour eyes stare at blackness beneath drenched canvas, water trickling down . . .

She worries, yes, about Withal. Who might awaken. Before or after. Who might smell the blood, the iron stench, the death riding out on Sandalath Drukorlat's last breath. Who might witness when all that Phaed was, truly was, could never be witnessed – because such things were not allowed, never allowed, and so she might have to kill him, too.

Vipers strike more than once.

Now at the door, the last barrier – *row you fools – the shore lies just beyond!* – and of course there is no lock binding the latch. No reason for it. Save one murderous child whose mother's head stares at canvas on a pitching deck. The one child who went to see that for herself. And we are drawn to pilgrimage. Because to live is to hunt for echoes. Echoes of what? No-one knows. But the pilgrimage is taken, yes, ever taken, and every now and then those echoes are caught – just a whisper – creaking oars, the slap and chop of waves like fists against the hull, clamouring to get in, and the burbling blood, the spitting suck as it sinks back down. And we hear, in those echoes, some master's voice: *Row! Row for the shore! Row for your lives!*

He remembered a story, the story he always remembered, would ever remember. An old man alone in a small fisher boat. Rowing into the face of a mountain of ice. Oh, he did love that story. The pointless glory of it, the mindless magic – he would grow chilled at the thought, at the vision he conjured of that wondrous, profound and profoundly useless scene. *Old man, what do you think you are doing? Old man – the ice!*

Inside, a shadow among shadows, gloom in the gloom, teeth hidden now, but the knife is a lurid gleam, catching reflections of rain from the window's pitted rainbow glass. And a shudder takes her then, pulling her down into a crouch as sensations flood up through her belly, lancing upward into her brain and her breath catches – oh, Phaed, don't scream now. Don't even moan.

They have drawn their cots together – on this night, then, the man and the bitch have shared the spit of their loins, isn't that sweet. She edges closer, eyes searching. Finding Sandalath's form on the left, closest to her. Convenient.

Phaed raises the knife.

In her mind, flashes, scene after scene, the sordid list of this old woman's constant slights, each one belittling Phaed, each one revealing to all nearby too many of Phaed's secret terrors – no-one has the right to do that, no-one has the right to then laugh – laugh in the eyes if not out loud. All those insults, well, the time has come to pay them back. Here, with one hard thrust of the knife.

She lifts the knife still higher, draws in her breath and holds it.

And stabs down.

Nimander's hand snaps out, catches her wrist, hard, tightening as she twists round, lips peeled back, eyes blazing with rage and fear. Her wrist is a tiny thing, like a bony snake, caught, frenzied, seeking to turn the knife, to set the edge against Nimander's hand. He twists again and bones break, an awful crunching, grinding sound.

The knife clunks on the wooden floor.

Nimander bears down on her, using his weight to crumple Phaed onto the floor beside the bed. She tries to scratch at his eyes and he releases the broken limb to grasp the other one. He breaks that one too.

She has not screamed. Amazing, that. Not a sound but her panting breath.

Nimander pins her down and takes her neck in his hands. He begins to squeeze.

*No more, Phaed. I now do as would Anomander Rake. As would Silchas Ruin. As would Sandalath herself were she awake. I do this, because I know you – yes, even now, there, in your bulging eyes where all your awareness now gathers in a flood, I can see the truth of you.*

*The emptiness inside.*

*Your mother stares in horror. At what she has spawned. She stares, disbelieving, clinging desperately to the possibility that she has got it wrong, that we all have, that you are not as you are. But that is no help. Not to her. Not to you.*

*Yes, stare up into my eyes, Phaed, and know that I see you.*

*I see you—*

He was being dragged away. Off Phaed. His hands were being pried loose, twisted painfully to break his grip – and he falls back, muscled arms wrapped about him now, and is dragged from Phaed, from her bloated face and the dreadful gasping – poor Phaed's throat hurts, maybe is torn, even. To breathe is to know agony.

But she lives. He has lost his chance, and now they will kill him.

Sandalath screams at him – she has been screaming at him for some time, he realizes. She first screamed when he broke Phaed's second wrist – awakened by Phaed's own screams – oh, of course she had not stayed quiet. Snapping bones would never permit that, not even from a soulless creature as was Phaed. She had screamed, and he'd heard nothing, not even echoes – *hands on the oar and squeeze!*

Now what would happen? Now what would they do?

'*Nimander!* '

He started, stared across at Sandalath, studied her face as if it were a stranger's.

Withal held him, arms trapped against his sides, but Nimander was not interested in struggling. It was too late for that.

Phaed had thrown up and the stink of her vomit was thick in the air.

Someone was pounding on the door – which in his wisdom Nimander had locked behind him after following Phaed into the room.

Sandalath yelled that it was all right, everything was fine – an accident, but everything is fine now.

But poor Phaed's wrists are broken. That will need seeing to.

Not now, Withal.

He stands limp in my arms, wife. Can I release him now?

Yes, but be wary—

I shall, no doubt of that.

And now Sandalath, positioned between Nimander and the still-coughing, gagging Phaed, took Nimander's face in her hands and leaned closer to study his eyes.

What do you see, Sandalath Drukorlat? Gems bright with truths and wonders? Pits whispering at you that no bottom will ever be found, that the plunge into a soul never ends? *Row, you fools! We're sinking!* Oh, don't giggle, Nimander, don't do that. Remain as you are, outwardly numb. Blank. What do you see? Why, nothing, of course.

'Nimander.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'You can kill me now.'

A strange look on her face. Something like horror. 'Nimander, no. Listen to me. I need to know. What has happened here? Why were you in our room?'

'Phaed.'

'Why were you both in our room, Nimander?'

*Why, I followed her. I stayed awake – I've been doing that a lot. I've been watching her for days and days, nights and nights. Watching her sleep, waiting for her to wake up, to take out her knife and smile a greeting to the dark. The dark that is our heritage, the dark of betrayal.*

*I don't remember when last I slept, Sandalath Drukorlat. I needed to stay awake, always awake. Because of Phaed.*

Did he answer her then? Out loud, all those tumbling statements, those reasonable explanations. He wasn't sure. 'Kill me now, so I can sleep, I so

want to sleep.'

'No-one is going to kill you,' Sandalath said. Her hands, pressed to the sides of his face, were slick with sweat. Or rain, perhaps. Not tears – *leave that to the sky, to the night.*

'I am sorry,' Nimander said.

'I think that apology should be saved for Phaed, don't you?'

'I am sorry,' he repeated to her, then added, 'that she's not dead.'

Her hands pulled away, leaving his cheeks suddenly cold.

'Hold a moment,' Withal said, stepping to the foot of the bed and bending down to pick up something. Gleaming, edged. Her knife. 'Now,' he said in a murmur, 'which one does this toy belong to, I wonder?'

'Nimander's still wearing his,' Sandalath said, and then she turned to stare down at Phaed.

A moment later, Withal grunted. 'She's been a hateful little snake around you, Sand. But this?' He faced Nimander. 'You just saved my wife's life? I think you did.' And then he moved closer, but there was nothing of the horror of Sandalath's face in his own. No, this was a hard expression, that slowly softened. 'Gods below, Nimander, you knew this was coming, didn't you? How long? When did you last sleep?' He stared a moment longer, then spun. 'Move aside, Sand, I think I need to finish what Nimander started—'

'No!' his wife snapped.

'She'll try again.'

'I understand that, you stupid oaf ! Do you think I've not seen into that fanged maw that is Phaed's soul? Listen, there is a solution—'

'Aye, wringing her scrawny neck—'

'We leave them here. On the island – we sail tomorrow without them. Withal – husband—'

'And when she recovers – creatures like this one always do – she'll take this damned knife and do to Nimander what she's tried to do to you. He saved your life, and I will not abandon him—'

'She won't kill him,' Sandalath said. 'You don't understand. She cannot – without him, she would be truly alone, and that she cannot abide – it would drive her mad—'

'Mad, aye, mad enough to take a knife to Nimander, the one who betrayed her!'

'No.'

'Wife, are you so certain? Is your faith in understanding the mind of a sociopath so strong? That you would leave Nimander with her?'

'Husband, her arms are broken.'

'And broken bones can be healed. A knife in the eye cannot.'

'She will not touch him.'

'Sand—'

Nimander spoke. 'She will not touch me.'

Withal's eyes searched his. 'You as well?'

'You must leave us here,' Nimander said, then winced at the sound of his own voice. So weak, so useless. He was no Anomander Rake. No Silchas Ruin. Andarist's faith in choosing him to lead the others had been a mistake. 'We cannot go with you. With *Silanda*. We cannot bear to see that ship any longer. Take it away, please, take *them* away!'

Oh, too many screams this night, in this room. More demands from outside, in growing alarm.

Sandalath turned and, drawing a robe about her – she had been, Nimander suddenly realized, naked – *a woman of matronly gifts, the body of a woman who had birthed children, a body such as young men dream of. And might there be wives who might be mothers who might be lovers . . . for one such as me? Stop, she is dead* – robe drawn, Sandalath walked to the door,

quickly unlocked it and slipped outside, closing the door behind her. More voices in the corridor.

Withal was staring down at Phaed, who had ceased her coughing, her whimpers of pain, her fitful weeping. 'This is not your crime, Nimander.'

What?

Withal reached down and grabbed Phaed by her upper arms. She shrieked.

'Don't,' Nimander said.

'Not your crime.'

'She will leave you, Withal. If you do that. She will leave you.'

He stared across at Nimander, then pushed Phaed back down onto the floor. 'You don't know me, Nimander. Maybe she doesn't, either – not when it comes to what I will do for her sake – and, I suppose,' he added with a snarl, 'for yours.'

Nimander had thought his words had drawn Withal back, had kept him from doing what he had intended to do, and so he was unprepared, and so he stood, watching, as Withal snatched Phaed up, surged across the room – carrying her as if she was no more than a sack of tubers – and threw her through the window.

A punching shatter of the thick, bubbled glass, and body, flopping arms and bared lower limbs – with dainty feet at the end – were gone, out into the night that howled, spraying the room with icy rain.

Withal stumbled back in the face of that wind, then he spun to face Nimander. 'I am going to lie,' he said in a growl. 'The mad creature ran, flung herself through – do you hear me?'

The door opened and Sandalath charged into the room, behind her the Adjunct's aide, Lostara Yil, and the priest, Banaschar – and, pushing close behind them, the other Tiste Andii – eyes wide with fear, confusion – and Nimander lurched towards them, one step, then another—

And was pulled round to face Sandalath.

Withal was speaking. A voice filled with disbelief. Expostulations.

But she was staring into his eyes. 'Did she? Nimander! *Did she?*'

*Did she what? Oh, yes, go through the window.*

Shouts from the street below, muted by the wailing winds and lashing rain. Lostara Yil moved to stand at the sill, leaned out. A moment later she stepped back and turned, her expression grave. 'Broken neck. I'm sorry, Sandalath. But I have questions . . .'

Mother, wife, Withal's lover, was still staring into Nimander's eyes – a look that said loss was rearing from the dark, frightened places in her mind, rearing, yes, to devour the love she held for her husband – for the man with the innocent face; that told him, with the answer he might give to her question, two more lives might be destroyed. *Did she? Through the window? Did she . . . die?*

Nimander nodded. 'Yes,' he said.

Another dead woman screamed in his skull and he almost reeled. Dead eyes, devouring all love. *'You have lied, Nimander!'*

*Yes. To save Withal. To save Sandalath Drukorlat—*

*'To save yourself!'*

*Yes.*

*'My love, what has happened to you?'*

*I heard a spinning sound. A whispering promise – we must stay here, you see. We must. Andarist chose me. He knew he was going to die. He knew that there would be no Anomander Rake, no Silchas Ruin, no great kin of our age of glory – no-one to come to save us, take care of us. There was only me.*

*My love, to lead is to carry burdens. As did the heroes of old, with clear eyes.*

*So look at my eyes, my love. See my burden? Just like a hero of old—*

Sandalath reached up again, those two long-fingered hands. Not to take his face, but to wipe away the rain streaming down his cheeks.

*My clear eyes.*

*We will stay here, on this island – we will look to the Shake, and see in them the faint threads of Tiste Andii blood, and we will turn them away from the barbarity that has taken them and so twisted their memories.*

*We will show them the shore. The true shore.*

*Burdens, my love. This is what it is to live, while your loved ones die.*

Sandalath, still ignoring Lostara Yil's questioning, now stepped back and turned to settle into her husband's arms.

And Withal looked across at Nimander.

Outside, the wind screamed.

*Yes, my love, see it in his eyes. Look what I have done to Withal. All because I failed.*

Last night's storm had washed the town clean, giving it a scoured appearance that made it very nearly palatable. Yan Tovis, Twilight, stood on the pier watching the foreign ships pull out of the harbour. At her side was her half-brother, Yedan Derryg, the Watch.

'Glad to see them go,' he said.

'You are not alone in that,' she replied.

'Brullyg's still dead to the world – but was that celebration or self-pity?'

Yan Tovis shrugged.

'At dawn,' Yedan Derryg said after a long moment of silence between them, 'our black-skinned cousins set out to build the tomb.' His bearded jaw bunched, molars grinding, then he said, 'Only met the girl once. Sour-faced, shy eyes.'

'Those broken arms did not come from the fall,' Yan Tovis said. 'Too bruised – the tracks of fingers. Besides, she landed on her head, bit through

her tongue clean as a knife cut.'

'Something happened in that room. Something sordid.'

'I am pleased we did not inherit such traits.'

He grunted, said nothing.

Yan Tovis sighed. 'Pully and Skwish seem to have decided their sole purpose in living these days is to harry me at every turn.'

'The rest of the witches have elected them as their representatives. You begin your rule as Queen in a storm of ill-feeling.'

'It's worse than that,' she said. 'This town is crowded with ex-prisoners. Debt-runners and murderers. Brullyg managed to control them because he could back his claim to being the nastiest adder in the pit. They look at me and see an Atri-Preda of the Imperial Army – just another warden – and you, Derryg, well, you're my strong-arm Finadd. They don't care a whit about the Shake and their damned queen.'

'Which is precisely why you need the witches, Twilight.'

'I know. And if that's not misery enough, *they* know it, too.'

'You need clout,' he said.

'Clever man.'

'Even as a child, you were prone to sarcasm.'

'Sorry.'

'The answer, I think, will be found with these Tiste Andii.'

She looked across at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Who knows more of our past than even the witches? Who knows it as a clean thing? A thing not all twisted by generations of corruption, of half-remembrances and convenient lies?'

'Your tongue runs away with you, Yedan.'

'More sarcasm.'

'No, I find myself somewhat impressed.'

The jaw bunched as he studied her.

She laughed. Could not help it. 'Oh, brother, come – the foreigners are gone and probably won't be back – ever.'

'They sail to their annihilation?'

'What do you think?'

'I'm not sure, Twilight. That child mage, Sinn . . .'

'You may be right. News of her imminent departure had Pully and Skwish dancing.'

'She destroyed a solid wall of ice half as long as Fent Reach. I would not discount these Malazans.'

'The Adjunct did not impress me,' Yan Tovis said.

'Maybe because she didn't need to.'

Twilight thought about that, then thought about it some more.

Neither spoke as they turned away from the glittering bay and the now-distant foreign ships.

The morning sun was actually beginning to feel warm – the final, most poignant proof that the ice was dead, the threat past. The Isle would live on.

On the street ahead the first bucket of night-soil slopped down onto the clean cobbles from a second-storey window, forcing passers-by to dance aside.

'The people greet you, Queen.'

'Oh, be quiet, Yedan.'

Captain Kindly stood by the port rail, staring across the choppy waves to the *Silanda*. Soldiers from both of the squads on that haunted ship were visible on the deck, a handful gathered about a game of bones or some such nefarious activity, whilst the sweeps churned the water in steady rhythm.

Masan Gilani was up near the steering oar, keeping Sergeant Cord company.

*Lucky bastard, that Cord.* Lieutenant Pores, positioned on Kindly's right, leaned his forearms on the rail, eyes fixed on Masan Gilani – as were, in all likelihood, the eyes of most of the sailors on this escort, those not busy readying the sails at any rate.

'Lieutenant.'

'Sir?'

'What do you think you are doing?'

'Uh, nothing, sir.'

'You're leaning on the gunnel. At ease. Did I at any time say "at ease", Lieutenant?'

Pores straightened. 'Sorry, sir.'

'That woman should be put up on report.'

'Aye, she's not wearing much, is she?'

'Out of uniform.'

'Damned distracting, isn't it, sir?'

'Disappointing, you mean, surely, Lieutenant.'

'Ah, that's the word I was looking for, all right. Thank you, sir.'

'The Shake make the most extraordinary combs,' Kindly said. 'Turtleshell.'

'Impressive, sir.'

'Expensive purchases, but well worth it, I should judge.'

'Yes sir. Tried them yet?'

'Lieutenant, do you imagine that to be amusing?'

'Sir? No, of course not!'

'Because, as is readily apparent, Lieutenant, your commanding officer has very little hair.'

'If by that you mean on your head, then yes sir, that is, uh, apparent indeed.'

'Am I infested with lice, then, that I might need to use a comb elsewhere on my body, Lieutenant?'

'I wouldn't know, sir. I mean, of course not.'

'Lieutenant, I want you to go to my cabin and prepare the disciplinary report on that soldier over there.'

'But sir, she's a marine.'

'Said report to be forwarded to Fist Keneb when such communication is practicable. Well, why are you still standing here? Get out of my sight, and no limping!'

'Limp's long gone, sir!'

Pores saluted then hurried away, trying not to limp. The problem was, it had become something of a habit when he was around Captain Kindly. Granted, a most pathetic attempt at eliciting some sympathy. Kindly had no sympathy. He had no friends, either. Except for his combs. 'And they're all teeth and no bite,' he murmured as he descended to Kindly's cabin. 'Turtleshell, ooh!'

Behind him, Kindly spoke, 'I have decided to accompany you, Lieutenant. To oversee your penmanship.'

Pores cringed, hitched a sudden limp then rubbed at his hip before opening the cabin hatch. 'Yes sir,' he said weakly.

'And when you are done, Lieutenant, my new turtleshell combs will need a thorough cleansing. Shake are not the most fastidious of peoples.'

'Nor are turtles.'

'Excuse me?'

'I will be most diligent, sir.'

'And careful.'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'In fact, I think I had better oversee that activity as well.'

'Yes sir.'

'That wasn't a limp I saw, was it?'

'No sir, I'm much better now.'

'Otherwise we would have to find a good reason for your limping, Lieutenant. For example, my finding a billy club and shattering your legs into pieces. Would that do, do you think? No need to answer, I see. Now, best find the ink box, yes?'

'I'm telling you, Masan, that was Kindly himself over there. Drooling over you.'

'You damned fool,' she said, then added, 'Sergeant.'

Cord just grinned. 'Even at that distance, your charms are, uh, unmistakable.'

'Sergeant, Kindly has probably not lain with a woman since the night of his coming of age, and that time was probably with a whore his father or uncle bought for the occasion. Women can tell these things. The man's repressed, in all the worst ways.'

'Oh, and what are the good ways of being repressed?'

'For a man? Well, decorum for one, as in not taking advantage of your rank. Listen closely now, if you dare. All real acts of chivalry are forms of repressed behaviour.'

'Where in Hood's name did you get that? Hardly back on the savannas of Dal Hon!'

'You'd be surprised what the women in the huts talk about, Sergeant.'

'Well, soldier, I happen to be steering this damned ship, so it was you who walked up here to stand with me, not the other way round!'

'I was just getting away from Balm's squad – not to mention that sapper of yours, Crump, who's decided I'm worthy of worship. Says I've got the tail of some salamander god.'

'You've what?'

'Aye. And if he grabs it it's liable to come off. I think he means he thinks I'm too perfect for the likes of him. Which is something of a relief. Doesn't stop him ogling me, though.'

'You get the ogles because you want the ogles, Masan Gilani. Keep your armour on and we'll all forget about you quick enough.'

'Armour on a ship? No thanks. That's a guarantee of a fast plunge to the mucky bottom, Sergeant.'

'We won't be seeing any battle on the waves,' Cord pronounced.

'Why not? The Letherii got a fleet or three, don't they?'

'Mostly chewed up by years at sea, Masan Gilani. Besides, they're not very good at the ship-to-ship kind of fighting – without their magic, that is.'

'Well, without our marines, neither are we.'

'They don't know that, do they?'

'We haven't got Quick Ben any more either.'

Cord leaned on the steering oar and looked across at her. 'You spent most of your time in the town, didn't you? Just a few trips back and forth to us up the north side of the island. Masan Gilani, Quick Ben had all the moves, aye, and even the look of an Imperial High Mage. Shifty, mysterious and scary as Hood's arse-crack. But I'll tell you this – Sinn, well, she's the real thing.'

'If you say so.' All Masan Gilani could think of, when it came to Sinn, was the little mute child curling up in the arms of every woman in sight,

suckling on tits like a newborn. Of course, that was outside Y'Ghatan. Long ago, now.

'I do say so,' Cord insisted. 'Now, if you ain't interested in getting unofficial with this sergeant here, best take your swaying hips elsewhere.'

'You men really are all the same.'

'And so are you women. Might interest you,' he added as she turned to leave, 'Crump's no whiskered shrew under those breeches.'

'That's disgusting.' But she paused at the steps leading down to the main deck and glanced back at the sergeant. 'Really?'

'Think I'd lie about something like that?'

He watched Masan Gilani sashay her way up the main deck to where Balm and the rest were gambling, Crump with all the winnings, thus far. They'd reel him in later, of course. Although idiots had a way of being damnably lucky.

In any case, the thought of Masan Gilani ending up with Crump, of all people, was simply too hilarious to let pass. If she wasn't interested in decent men like Sergeant Cord, well, she could have the sapper and so deserve everything that came with him. *Aye, he'll worship you all right. Even what you cough up every morning and that sweet way you clear your nose before going into battle. Oh, wait till I tell Shard about this. And Ebron. And Limp. We'll set up a book, aye. How long before she runs screaming. With Crump loping desperate after her, knees at his ears.*

Ebron climbed onto the aft deck. 'What's got you looking so cheerful, Sergeant?'

'I'll tell you later. Dropped out of the game?'

'Crump's still winning.'

'Ain't turned it yet?'

'We tried, half a bell ago, Sergeant. But the damned fool's luck's gone all uncanny.'

'Really? He's not a mage or something, is he?'

'Gods no, the very opposite. All my magics go awry – the ones I tried on him and on the bones and skull. Those Mott Irregulars, they were mage-hunters, you know. High Marshal this and High Marshal that – if Crump really is a Bole, one of the brothers, well, they were legendary.'

'You saying we're underestimating the bastard, Ebron?'

The squad mage looked morose. 'By about three hundred imperial jakatas and counting, Sergeant.'

*Hood's balls, maybe Masan Gilani will like being Queen of the Universe.*

'What was that you were going to tell me about, Sergeant?'

'Never mind.'

Shurq Elalle stood on the foredeck of the *Froth Wolf* and held a steady, gauging eye on the *Undying Gratitude* five reaches ahead. All sails out, riding high. Skorgen Kaban was captaining her ship and would continue to do so until they reached the mouth of the Lether River. Thus far, he'd not embarrassed himself – or, more important, her.

She wasn't very happy about all of this, but these Malazans were paying her well indeed. Good-quality gold, and a chestful of that would come in handy in the days, months and probably years to come.

Yet another invasion of the Letherii Empire, and in its own way possibly just as nasty as the last one. Were these omens, then, signalling the decline of a once great civilization? Conquered by barbaric Tiste Edur, and now in the midst of a protracted war that might well bleed them out, right down to a lifeless corpse.

Unless, of course, those hapless abandoned marines – whatever 'marines' were; soldiers, anyway – were already jellied and dissolving into the humus. A very real possibility, and Shurq was not privy to any details of the campaign so she had no way of knowing either way.

So, here she was, returning at last to Letheras . . . maybe just in time to witness its conquest. *Witness – now really, darling Shurq, you've a bigger*

*role than that. Like leading the damned enemy right up to the docks. And how famous will that make you then? How many more curses on your name?*

'There is a ritual,' said a voice behind her.

She turned. That odd man, the one in the ratty robes, whose face was so easily forgotten. The priest. 'Banaschar, is it?'

He nodded. 'May I join you, Captain?'

'As you please, but at the moment I am not a captain. I'm a passenger, a guest.'

'As am I,' he replied. 'As I mentioned a moment ago, there is a ritual.'

'Meaning what?'

'To find and bind your soul to your body once more – to remove your curse and make you alive again.'

'A little late for that, even if I desired such a thing, Banaschar.'

His brows rose. 'You do not dream of living again?'

'Should I?'

'I am probably the last living High Priest of D'rek, the Worm of Autumn. The face of the aged, the dying and the diseased. And of the all-devouring earth that takes flesh and bone, and the fires that transform into ashes—'

'Yes, fine, I grasp the allusions.'

'I, more perhaps than most, do understand the tension between the living and the dead, the bitterness of the season that finds each and every one of us —'

'Do you always go on like this?'

He looked away. 'No. I am trying to resurrect my faith—'

'By the Tiles, Banaschar, don't make me laugh. Please.'

'Laugh? Ah, yes, the play on words. Accidental—'

'Rubbish.'

That elicited a mocking smile – which was better than the grave misery that had been there a moment earlier. 'Very well, Shurq Elalle, why do you not wish to live once again?'

'I don't get old, do I? I stay as I am, suitably attractive—'

'Outwardly, yes.'

'And have you taken the time to look *inward*, Banaschar?'

'I would not do such a thing without your permission.'

'I give it. Delve deep, High Priest.'

His gaze fixed on her, but slowly surrendered its focus. A moment passed, then he paled, blinked and stepped back. 'Gods below, what is *that*?'

'I don't know what you mean, good sir.'

'There are . . . roots . . . filling your entire being. Every vein and artery, the thinnest capillaries . . . alive . . .'

'My ootooloo – they said it would take over, eventually. Its appetites are' – she smiled – 'boundless. But I have learned to control them, more or less. It possesses its own rigour, yes?'

'You are dead and yet not dead, not any more – but what lives within you, what has claimed your entire body, Shurq Elalle, it is *alien*. A parasite!'

'Beats fleas.'

He gaped.

She grew impatient with his burgeoning alarm. 'Errant take your rituals. I am content enough as I am, or will be once I get scoured out and some new spices stuffed—' 'Stop, please.'

'As you like. Is there something else you wanted to discuss? Truth is, I have little time for high priests. As if piety comes from gaudy robes and self-righteous arrogance. Show me a priest who knows how to dance and I might bask in his measure, for a time. Otherwise . . .'

He bowed. 'Forgive me, then.'

'Forget trying to resurrect your faith, Banaschar, and try finding for yourself a more worthy ritual of living.'

He backed away, and very nearly collided with the Adjunct and Tavore's ever-present bodyguard, Lostara Yil. Another hasty bow, then flight down the steps.

The Adjunct frowned at Shurq Elalle. 'It seems you are upsetting my other passengers, Captain.'

'Not my concern, Adjunct. I would be of better service if I was on my own ship.'

'You lack confidence in your first mate?'

'My incomplete specimen of a human? Why would you imagine that?'

Lostara Yil snorted, then pointedly ignored the Adjunct's quick warning glance.

'I will have many questions to ask you, Captain,' Tavore said. 'Especially the closer we get to Letheras. And I will of course value your answers.'

'You are being too bold,' Shurq Elalle said, 'heading straight for the capital.'

'Answers, not advice.'

Shurq Elalle shrugged. 'I had an uncle who chose to leave Letheras and live with the Meckros. He wasn't much for listening to advice either. So off he went, and then, not so long ago, there was a ship, a Meckros ship from one of their floating cities south of Pilott – and they told tales of a sister city being destroyed by ice, then vanishing – almost no wreckage left behind at all – and no survivors. Probably straight down to the deep. That hapless city was the one my uncle lived on.'

'Then you should have learned a most wise lesson,' Lostara Yil said in a rather dry tone that hinted of self-mockery.

'Oh?'

'Yes. People who make up their minds about something never listen to advice – especially when it's to the contrary.'

'Well said.' Shurq Elalle smiled at the tattooed woman. 'Frustrating, isn't it?'

'If you two are done with your not very subtle complaints,' the Adjunct said, 'I wish to ask the captain here about the Letherii secret police, the Patriotists.'

'Ah well,' Shurq Elalle said, 'that is not a fun subject.

Not fun at all.'

'I am not interested in fun,' Tavore said.

And one look at her, Shurq Elalle reflected, was proof enough of that.

With twelve of his most loyal guards from the Eternal Domicile, Sirryn marched up Kravos Hill, the west wall of Letheras two thousand paces behind him. The tents of the Imperial Brigade dominated in the midst of ancillary companies and lesser brigades, although the Tiste Edur encampment, situated slightly apart from the rest, to the north, looked substantial – at least two or three thousand of the damned savages, Sirryn judged.

Atop Kravos Hill stood half a dozen Letherii officers and a contingent of Tiste Edur, among them Hanradi Khalag. Sirryn withdrew a scroll and said to the once-king, 'I am here to deliver the Chancellor's orders.'

Expressionless, Hanradi reached out for the scroll, then passed it on to one of his aides without looking at it.

Sirryn scowled. 'Such orders—'

'I do not read Letherii,' Hanradi said.

'If you'd like, I can translate—'

'I have my own people for that, Finadd.' Hanradi Khalag looked across at the officers of the Imperial Brigade. 'In the future,' he said, 'we Edur will patrol the boundaries of our own camp. The parade of Letherii whores is

now at an end, so your pimp soldiers will have to make their extra coin elsewhere.'

The Edur commander led his troop away, down off the summit of the hill. Sirryn stared after them for a moment, until he was certain they would not return. He then withdrew a second scroll and approached the Preda of the Imperial Brigade. 'These, too,' he said, 'are the Chancellor's orders.'

The Preda was a veteran, not just of battle, but of the ways of the palace. He simply nodded as he accepted the scroll. 'Finadd,' he asked, 'will the Chancellor be commanding us in person when the time comes?'

'I imagine not, sir.'

'That could make things awkward.'

'In some matters, I will speak for him, sir. As for the rest, you will find, once you have examined that scroll, that you are given considerable freedom for the battle itself.'

'And if I find myself at odds with Hanradi?'

'I doubt that will be a problem,' Sirryn said.

He watched the Preda mull that over, and thought he saw a slight widening of the man's eyes.

'Finadd,' the Preda said.

'Sir?'

'How fares the Chancellor, at the moment?'

'Well indeed, sir.'

'And . . . in the future?'

'He is most optimistic, sir.'

'Very good. Thank you, Finadd.'

Sirryn saluted. 'Begging your leave, sir, I wish to oversee the establishment of my camp.'

'Make it close to this hill, Finadd – this is where we will command the battle – and I will want you close.'

'Sir, there is scant room left—'

'You have my leave to move people out at your discretion, Finadd.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Oh, he would enjoy that. Grubby soldiers with dust on their boots – they always imagined themselves superior to their counterparts in the palace. Well, a few cracked skulls would change that quick enough. *By leave of their very own Preda.* He saluted again and led his troops back down the hill.

The man looked familiar. Had he been a student of hers? Son of a neighbour, son of another scholar? These were the questions in Janath's mind as the troop dragged them from Tehol's home. Of the journey to the compound of the Patriotists, she now recalled very little. But that man, with the familiar face – a face that stirred oddly intimate feelings within her – would not leave her.

Chained in her cell, chained in the darkness that crawled with vermin, she had been left alone for some time now. Days, perhaps even a week. A single plate of watery stew slid through the trap at the foot of the door at what seemed irregular intervals – it would not be pushed into her cell if she did not leave the empty plate from the last meal within easy reach of the guard. The ritual had not been explained to her, but she had come to admire its precision, its eloquence. Disobedience meant hunger; or, rather, starvation – hunger was always there, something that she had not experienced in the household of Bugg and Tehol. There had been a time, back then, when she had come to loathe the taste of chicken. Now she dreamed of those damned hens.

The man, Tanal Yathvanar, had visited but once, apparently to gloat. She'd no idea she had been wanted for sedition, although in truth that did not surprise her much. When thugs were in power, educated people were the first to feel their fists. It was so pathetic, really, how so much violence came from someone feeling *small*. Small of mind, and it did not matter how big

the sword in hand, that essential *smallness* remained, gnawing with very sharp teeth.

Both Bugg and Tehol had hinted, occasionally, that things would not go well if the Patriotists found her. Well, *them*, as it turned out. Tehol Beddict, her most frustrating student, who had only attended her lectures out of adolescent lust, now revealed as the empire's greatest traitor – so Tanal Yathvanar had said to her, the glee in his voice matched by the lurid reflections in his eyes as he stood with his lantern in one hand and the other touching his private parts whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She had been sitting with her back to the stone wall, head tilted down chin to chest, with her filthy hair hanging ragged over her face.

Tehol Beddict, masterminding the empire's economic ruin – well, that was still a little hard to believe. Oh, he had the talent, yes. And maybe even the inclination. But for such universal collapse as was now occurring, there was a legion of co-conspirators. Unwitting for the most part, of course, barring that niggling in their guts that what they were doing was, ultimately, destructive beyond measure. But greed won out, as it always did. So, Tehol Beddict had paved the road, but hundreds – thousands? – had freely chosen to walk it. And now they cried out, indignant and appalled, even as they scurried for cover lest blame spread its crimson pool.

As things stood at the moment, the entire crime now rested at Tehol's feet – and Bugg's, the still elusive manservant.

*'But we will find him, Janath,'* Tanal Yathvanar had said. *'We find everyone, eventually.'*

*Everyone but yourselves*, she had thought to reply, *for that search leads you onto a far too frightening path.* Instead, she had said nothing, given him nothing at all. And watched as the sword got ever smaller in his hand – *yes*, that *sword, too*.

*'Just as we found you. Just as I found you. Oh, it's well known now. I was the one to arrest Tehol Beddict and Scholar Janath. Me. Not Karos Invictad, who sits day and night drooling over his box and that blessed two-headed insect. It has driven him mad, you know. He does nothing else.'* He then

laughed. *'Did you know he is now the richest man in the empire? At least, he thinks he is. But I did the work for him. I made the transactions. I have copies of everything. But the real glory is this – I am his beneficiary, and he doesn't even know it!'*

Yes, the two-headed insect. One drooling, the other nattering.

Tanal Yathvanar. She knew him – that was now a certainty. She knew him, because he had done all this to her before. There had been no dissembling when he had talked about that – it was the source for his gloating over her, after all, so it could not be a lie.

And now her memories – of the time between the end of the semester at the academy, and her awakening in the care of Tehol and Bugg – memories that had been so fragmented, images blurred beyond all understanding, began to coalesce, began to draw into focus.

She was wanted, because she had escaped. Which meant that she had been arrested – her first arrest – and her tormentor had been none other than Tanal Yathvanar.

Logical. Reasonable intuitions from the available facts and her list of observations. Cogent argument and standing before her – some time ago now – the one man who offered the most poignant proof as he babbled on, driven by her lack of reaction. *'Dear Janath, we must resume where we left off. I don't know how you got away. I don't even know how you ended up with Tehol Beddict. But once more you are mine, to do with as I please. And what I will do with you will not, alas, please you, but your pleasure is not what interests me. This time, you will beg me, you will promise anything, you will come to worship me. And that is what I will leave you with, today. To give you things to think about, until my return.'*

Her silence, it had turned out, had been a weak defence.

She was beginning to remember – past those ordered details arranged with clinical detachment – and with those memories there was . . . pain.

Pain beyond comprehension.

*I was driven mad. That is why I could not remember anything. Entirely mad – I don't know how Bugg and Tehol healed me, but they must have. And Tehol's consideration, his very uncharacteristic gentleness with me – not once did he seek to take advantage of me, although he must have known that he could have, that I would have welcomed it. That should have awakened suspicion in me, it should have, but I was too happy, too strangely content, even as I waited and waited for Tehol to find himself in my arms.*

*Ah, now isn't that an odd way of putting it?*

She wondered where he was. In another cell? There were plenty of moaners and criers for neighbours, most beyond all hope of communication. Was one of them Tehol Beddict? Broken into a bleeding, gibbering thing?

She did not believe it. Would not. No, for the Great Traitor of the Empire, there would have to be spectacle. A Drowning of such extravagance as to burn like a brand into the collective memory of the Letherii people. He would need to be broken publicly. Made the singular focus for this overwhelming tide of rage and fear. Karos Invictad's crucial act to regain control, to quell the anarchy, the panic, to restore order.

What irony, that even as Emperor Rhulad prepared to slaughter champions – among them some reputed to be the most dangerous Rhulad would ever face – Karos Invictad could so easily usurp the attention of everyone – well, among the Letherii, that is – with this one arrest, this one trial, this one act of bloodletting.

*Doesn't he realize? That to kill Tehol Beddict this way will be to make of him a martyr? One such as has never been seen before? Tehol Beddict sought to destroy the Letherii system of Indebtedness. Sought to destroy the unholy union of coin and power. He will be the new Errant, but a new kind of Errant. One bound to justice, to freedom, to the commonality of humans. Regardless of whether he was right, regardless even if these were his aims – none of that will matter. He will be written of, a thousand accounts, and in time but a handful will survive, drawn together to forge the heart of a new cult.*

*And you, Karos Invictad, oh, how your name will ride the breath of curses, for ever more.*

*Make someone a martyr and surrender all control, of what that someone was in life, of what that someone becomes in death. Do this, Karos Invictad, and you will have lost, even as you lick the man's blood from your hands.*

Yet, perhaps the Invigilator understood all of that. Enough to have already murdered Tehol Beddict, murdered him and dumped the body into the river, weighted down with stones. Unannounced, all in the darkness of night.

But no – the people wanted, needed, demanded that public, ritualized execution of Tehol Beddict.

And so she went round and round, in the swirling drain of her mind, the bottomless well that was her spirit's defensive collapse sucking her down, ever down.

Away from the memories.

From Tanal Yathvanar.

And what he had done to her before.

And what he would do to her now.

* * *

The proud, boisterous warrior who had been Gadalanak returned to the compound barely recognizable as human. The kind of failure, Samar Dev was led to understand, that infuriated this terrible, terrifying Emperor. Accordingly, Gadalanak had been cut to pieces. Long after he was dead, Rhulad's dread sword had swung down, chopping, slashing, stabbing and twisting. Most of the man's blood had probably drained into the sand of the arena floor, since the corpse carried by the burial retinue of Indebted did not even drip.

Puddy and other warriors, still waiting their turn – the masked woman included – stood nearby, watching the bearers and their reed stretcher with its grisly heap of raw meat and jutting bone cross the compound on their way to what was known as the Urn Room, where Gadalanak's remains

would be interred. Another Indebted trailed the bearers, carrying the warrior's weapon and shield, virtually clean of any blood, spattered or otherwise. Word had already come of the contest's details. The Emperor had cut off Gadalanak's weapon-arm with the first blow, midway between hand and elbow, sending the weapon flying off to one side. Shield-arm followed, severed at the shoulder. It was said the attending Tiste Edur – and the few Letherii dignitaries whose bloodlust overwhelmed panic at sudden financial straits – had then voiced an ecstatic roar, as if answering Gadalanak's own screams.

Silent, sober of expression and pale as bleached sand, Puddy and the others watched this grim train, as did Samar Dev herself. Then she turned away. Into the side corridor, down its dusty, gloomy length.

Karsa Orlong was lying on the oversized cot that had been built for some previous champion – a full-blood Tarthenal, although still not as tall as the Teblor now sprawled down its length, bared feet jutting over the end with the toes pressed against the wall – a wall stamped with the grime of those toes and feet, since Karsa Orlong had taken to doing very little, ever since the announcement of the contests.

'He's dead,' she said.

'Who?'

'Gadalanak. Within two or three heartbeats – I think it was a mistake, all of you deciding not to attend – you need to see the one you will fight. You need to know his style. There might be weaknesses—'

Karsa snorted. 'Revealed in two heartbeats?'

'The others, I suspect, will now change their minds. They will go, see for themselves—'

'Fools.'

'Because they won't follow your lead in this?'

'I wasn't even aware they had, witch. What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?'

She stepped into the room. 'Doing what?'

'You are dragging your ghosts with you.'

'More like they're clinging to my heels, gibbering – something is building within you, Karsa Orlong—'

'Climb onto me and we can relieve that, Samar Dev.'

'Amazing,' she breathed.

'Yes.'

'No, you idiot. I was just commenting on how you can still manage to shock me on occasion.'

'You only pretend to innocence, woman. Take your clothes off.'

'If I did, it would only be because you have worn me down. But I won't, because I am tougher than you think. One look at the odious stains your feet have left on that wall is enough to quench any ardour I might – in sudden madness – experience.'

'I did not ask you to make love to my feet.'

'Shouldn't you be exercising – no, not that kind. I mean, staying limber, stretching and the like.'

'What do you want?'

'Reassurance, I think.'

He turned to look at her, then slowly sat up, the cot groaning beneath him. 'Samar Dev, what is it you fear the most?'

'Well, you dying, I think. Infuriating as you are, you are a friend. To me, at least. That, and the fact that, uh, after you, they will call upon Icarium. As you can see, the two fears are closely bound together.'

'Is this what the spirits crowding you fear as well?'

'An interesting question. I'm not sure, Karsa.' And, a moment later, she added, 'Yes, I see now how that might be important – worth knowing, I

mean.'

'I have my own ghosts,' he said.

'I know. And what are they feeling? Can you tell?'

'Eager.'

She frowned. 'Truly, Karsa Orlong? *Truly?* '

He laughed. 'Not for what you think. No, they delight in the end that is coming to them, to the sacrifice they will make.'

'What kind of sacrifice?'

'When the time comes, witch, you must draw your iron knife. Give it your blood. Free the spirits you have bound.'

'What time, damn you?'

'You will know. Now, take off your clothes. I will see you naked.'

'No. Gadalanak is dead. Never again will we hear his laughter—'

'Yes, so it is for us to laugh, now, Samar Dev. We must remind ourselves what it is to live. For him. For Gadalanak.'

She stared at him, then hissed in anger. 'You almost had me, Karsa Orlong. It's when you get too convincing, you know, that you become the most dangerous.'

'Perhaps you'd rather I just took you, then. Tore your clothes away with my own hands. Flung you down on the bed.'

'I'm leaving now.'

* * *

Taralack Veed had once dreamt of the time now imminent, when Icarium Lifestealer would step onto the sand of the arena, amidst the eager roar of unwitting onlookers – and those derisive cries would change very quickly, oh yes, to ones of astonishment, then terror. As the rage was awakened, unleashed.

As the world began its gory end. An emperor, a palace, a city, the heart of an empire.

But this Rhulad would not die. Not with finality. No, each time he would rise again, and two forces would lock together in battle that might never end. Unless . . . could Icarium be killed? Could he die? He was not immortal, after all – although it could be argued that his rage was, the rage of the victim, generation after generation, a rage against injustice and inequity, and such a thing was without end.

No, if Taralack Veed pushed his thoughts far enough, he ever came to the same place. Rhulad would kill Icarium. A hundred clashes, a thousand – at some point, on a continent of ashes, the burgeoning chaos would strike through, into the heart of Icarium's rage. And Lifestealer would fall.

There was logic to this. The victim might awaken to fury, but the victim was doomed to be just that: a victim. This was the true cycle, the one to which every culture, every civilization, was witness, century upon century. *A natural force, the core of the struggle to exist is the desire to not just survive, but thrive. And to thrive is to feed on victims, ever more victims.*

'It is the language itself,' Senior Assessor said, kneeling over a basin of still water to study his reflection as he applied gaudy paint. 'Life pushes forward, when it succeeds. Life halts or falls to the wayside, when it fails. Progression, Taralack Veed, implies a journey, but not necessarily one through a fixed interval of time. That is, the growth and ageing of an individual person, although that too is quickly sewn into the cloth. No, the true journey is one of procreation, one's seed moving from host to host in a succession of generations, each of which must be successful to some degree, lest the seed . . . halt, fall to the wayside. Of course, it is not in a single man's mind to think in terms of generation upon generation, although the need to sow his seed is ever paramount. Other concerns, all of which support that which is paramount, generally occupy the mind on a moment to moment basis. The acquisition of food, the security of one's shelter, the support of one's family, relatives and allies, the striving to fashion a predictable world, peopled with predictable people – the quest, if you will, for comfort.'

Taralack Veed looked away, back to the window, where stood Finadd Varat Taun, watching something in the compound below. 'Monk,' Taralack said in a growl, 'among my tribe, each of the things you describe was but part of a war, a feud that could never end. Each was desperate and vicious. No love, no loyalty could be wholly trusted, because the ground churned beneath our feet. Nothing is certain. Nothing.'

'One thing is,' Varat Taun said, facing them. 'The warrior named Gadalanak is dead. And now so too is the one named Puddy, the quick one who loved to boast.'

Taralack Veed nodded. 'You come to believe as I now do, Finadd. Yes, you and I, we have seen Icarium in his anger. But this Emperor, this Rhulad . . .'

The monk made a strange grunting noise, then pivoted on the stool – away from them both – and hugged himself.

Varat Taun frowned and took a step forward. 'Senior Assessor? Priest? Is something wrong?'

A vigorous shake of the head, then: 'No, please. Let us change the subject. Blessed God, I almost failed – the mirth, you see, it very nearly burst from me. Ah, it is all I can do to restrain myself.'

'Your faith in your god is unshaken.'

'Yes, Taralack Veed. Oh yes. Is it not said Rhulad is mad? Driven insane by countless deaths and rebirths? Well, my friends, I tell you, Lifestealer, my most beloved god – the one god – well, he too is mad. And remember this, please, it is Icarium who has come here. Not Rhulad – my god has made this journey. To delight in his own madness.'

'Rhulad is—'

'No, Varat Taun, Rhulad is *not*. A god. *The* god. He is a cursed creature, as mortal as you or me. The power lies in the sword he wields. The distinction, my friends, is essential. Now, enough, lest my vow is sundered. You are both too grave, too poisoned by fear and dread. My heart is near to bursting.'

Taralack Veed stared at the monk's back, saw the trembling that would not still. *No, Senior Assessor, it is you who is mad. To worship Icarium? Does a Gral worship the viper? The scorpion?*

*Spirits of the rock and sand, I cannot wait much longer. Let us be done with this.*

'The end,' Senior Assessor said, 'is never what you imagine. Be comforted by that, my friends.'

Varat Taun asked the monk, 'When do you intend to witness your first contest?'

'If any – and I am not yet decided – if any, then the Toblakai, of course,' Senior Assessor murmured, finally in control of his amusement – so much so that he twisted round to look up at the Finadd with calm, knowing eyes. 'The Toblakai.'

Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, stood above the corpse of his third victim. Splashed in blood not his own, sword trembling in his hand, he stared down at the still face with its lifeless eyes as the crowd dutifully roared its pleasure, gave voice to his bitter triumph.

That onrushing wall of noise parted around him, left him untouched. It was, he well knew, a lie. Everything was a lie. The challenge, which had proved anything but. The triumph, which was in truth a failure. The words uttered by his Chancellor, by his bent and twisted Ceda – and every face turned his way was as this one below. A mask, a thing of death, an expression of hidden laughter, hidden mockery. For if it was not death that mocked him, then what?

When last did he see something genuine in a subject's face? *When you did not think of them as subjects. When they were not. When they were friends, brothers, fathers and mothers. I have my throne, I have my sword, I have an empire. But I have . . . no-one.*

He so wanted to die. A true death. To fall and not find his spirit flesh cast up on the strand of that dread god's island.

*But it will be different this time. I can feel it. Something . . . will be different.*

Ignoring the crowd and its roar now creeping towards hysteria, Rhulad walked from the arena, through the shimmering ripples rising from the sun-baked sand. His own sweat had thinned the blood splashed upon him, sweat seeping out from between tarnished coins, glistening from the ringed ridges of pocked scars. Sweat and blood merged into these streams of sour victory that could but temporarily stain the surfaces of the coins.

Chancellor Triban Gnol could not understand that, Rhulad knew. How gold and silver outlived the conceits of mortal lives. Nor could Invigilator Karos Invictad.

In many ways Rhulad found himself admiring this Great Traitor, Tehol Beddict. *Beddict, yes, the brother of the one honourable Letherii warrior I was privileged to meet. One, only one. Brys Beddict, who defeated me truly – and in that too he was like no other.* Karos Invictad had wanted to drag Tehol Beddict out here into the arena, to stand before the Emperor, to be shamed and made to hear the frenzied hunger of the crowd. Karos Invictad had thought that such a thing would humiliate Tehol Beddict. *But if Tehol is like Brys, he would but stand, he would but smile, and that smile would be his challenge. To me. His invitation to execute him, cut him down as I never did to Brys. And yes, I would see that knowing, there in his eyes.* Rhulad had forbidden that. Leave Tehol to the Drownings. To that circus of savagery transformed into a game of wagers.

In the meantime, the empire's foundations wobbled, spat dust in grinding protest; the once-firm cornerstones shook as if revealed to be nothing more than clay, still wet from the river. Men who had been wealthy had taken their own lives. Warehouses had been besieged by an ever-growing mob – this thousand-headed beast of need rising in every city and town of the empire. Blood had spilled over a handful of docks, a crust of stale bread, and in the poorest slums mothers smothered their babies rather than see them bloat then wither with starvation.

Rhulad left the harsh sunlight and stood in the tunnel entrance, swallowed by shadows.

*My grand empire.*

The Chancellor stood before him each day, and lied. All was well, all would be well with the execution of Tehol Beddict. The mines were working overtime, forging more currency, but this needed careful control, because Karos Invictad believed that all that Tehol had stolen would be retrieved. Even so, better a period of inflation than the chaos now plaguing Lether.

But Hannan Mosag told him otherwise, had indeed fashioned rituals permitting Rhulad to see for himself – the riots, the madness, scenes blurred, at times maddeningly faded, yet still they stank of the truth. Where the Ceda lied was in what he would not reveal.

*'What of the invasion, Ceda? Show me these Malazans.'*

*'I cannot, alas, Emperor. They protect themselves with strange magics. See, the water in the bowl grows cloudy when I quest their way. As if they could cast in handfuls of flour. Blinding all the water might reveal.'*

Lies. Triban Gnol had been more blunt in his assessment – a directness that unveiled the Chancellor's growing concern, perhaps even his fear. The Malazans who had landed on the west coast, who had begun their march inland – towards Letheras itself – were proving themselves both cunning and deadly. To clash with them was to reel back bloodied and battered, a retreat strewn with dead soldiers and dead Tiste Edur. Yes, they were coming for Rhulad. Could the Chancellor stop them?

*'Yes, Emperor. We can. We shall. Hanradi has divided his Edur forces. One waits with our main army just west of the city. The other has travelled fast and light northward and is even now swinging westward, like a sweeping arm, to appear behind these Malazans – but not as has been attempted before. No, your Edur do not ride in column, do not travel the roads now. They fight as they once did, during the unification wars. War-parties, moving silent in the shadows, matching the Malazans and perhaps going one better in their stealth—'*

*'Yes! We adapt, not into something new, but into something old – the very heart of our prowess. Whose idea was this? Tell me!'*

A bow from Triban Gnol. 'Sire, did you not place me in charge of this defence?'

'Then, you.'

Another bow. 'As I said, Emperor, the guiding hand was yours.'

To be so unctuous was to reveal contempt. Rhulad understood that much. The Ceda lacked such civilized nuances in his reply: *'The idea was mine and Hanradi's, Emperor. After all, I was the Warlock King and he was my deadliest rival. This can be remade into a war we Edur understand and know well. It is clear enough that attempting to fight these Malazans in the manner of the Letherii has failed—'*

*'But there will be a clash, a great battle.'*

*'It seems so.'*

*'Good.'*

*'Perhaps not. Hanradi believes . . .'*

And there the dissembling had begun, the half-truths, the poorly veiled attacks upon the Chancellor and his new role as military commander.

To fashion knowledge to match the reality was difficult, to sift through the lies, to shake free the truths – Rhulad was exhausted by it, yet what else could he do? He was learning, damn them all. He was learning.

'Tell me, Ceda, of the Bolkando invasion.'

'Our border forts have been overrun. There have been two battles and in both the Letherii divisions were forced to withdraw, badly wounded. That alliance among the eastern kingdoms is now real, and it appears that they have hired mercenary armies . . .'

*The Bolkando Conspiracy . . . now real. Meaning it had begun as a lie.* He recalled Triban Gnol's shocked expression when Rhulad had repeated Hannan Mosag's words – as if they were his own. *'That alliance among the eastern kingdoms is now real, Chancellor . . .'*

Triban Gnol's mask had cracked then – no illusion there, no game brought to a yet deeper level. The man had looked . . . *guilty*.

*We must win these wars. To the west and to the east. We must, as well, refashion this empire. The days of the Indebted will be gone. The days of the coins ruling this body are over. I, Rhulad, Emperor, shall set my hands upon this clay, and make of it something new.*

*So, let the plague of suicides among the once-rich continue. Let the great merchant houses crash down into ruin. Let the poor rend the nobles limb from limb. Let estates burn. When the ashes have settled, have cooled, then shall Rhulad find fertile ground for his new empire.*

*Yes, that is what is different, this time. I sense a rebirth. Close. Imminent. I sense it, and maybe it will be enough, maybe it will give me reason again to cherish this life. My life.*

*Oh, Father Shadow, guide me now.*

Mael had been careless. It had been that carelessness that the Errant had relied upon. The Elder God so fixed on saving his foolish mortal companion, blundering forward into such a simple trap. A relief to have the meddling bastard out of the way, serving as a kind of counter-balance to the lurid acquisitiveness of Feather Witch, whose disgusting company the Errant had just left.

And now he stood in the dark corridor. Alone.

'*We will have our Mortal Sword*,' she had announced from her perch on the altar that squatted like an island amidst black floodwater. '*The idiot remains blind and stupid.*'

*Which idiot would that be, Feather Witch? Our imminent Mortal Sword?*

*'I do not understand your sarcasm, Errant. Nothing has gone astray. Our cult grows day by day, among the Letherii slaves, and now the Indebted—'*

*The disaffected, you mean. And what is it you are promising them, Feather Witch? In my name?*

*'The golden age of the past. When you stood ascendant among all other gods. When yours was the worship of all the Letherii. Our glory was long ago, and to that we must return.'*

*There was never a golden age. Worship of me to the exclusion of all other gods has never existed among the Letherii. The time you speak of was an age of plurality, of tolerance, a culture flowering—*

*'Never mind the truth. The past is what I say it is. That is the freedom of teaching the ignorant.'*

He had laughed then. *The High Priestess stumbles upon a vast wisdom. Yes, gather your disaffected, ignorant fools, then. Fill their heads with the noble glory of a non-existent past, then send them out with their eyes blazing in stupid – but comforting – fervour. And this will begin our new golden age, an exultation in the pleasures of repression and tyrannical control over the lives of everyone. Hail the mighty Errant, the god who brooks no dissent.*

*'What you do with your power is up to you. I know what I plan to do with mine.'*

*Udinaas has rejected you, Feather Witch. You have lost the one you wanted the most.*

She had smiled. *'He will change his mind. You will see. Together, we shall forge a dynasty. He was an Indebted. I need only awaken the greed within him.'*

*Feather Witch, listen well to your god. To this modest sliver of wisdom. The lives of others are not yours to use. Offer them bliss, yes, but do not be disappointed when they choose misery – because the misery is theirs, and in deciding to choose someone else's path or their own, they will choose their own. The Shake have a saying: 'Open to them your hand to the shore, watch them walk into the sea.'*

*'No wonder they were wiped out.'*

*Feather Witch—*

*'Listen to my wisdom now, Errant. Wisdom the Shake should have heeded. When it comes to using the lives of others, the first thing to take from them is the privilege of choice. Once you have done that, the rest is easy.'*

He had found his High Priestess. Indeed. *Bless us all*.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Open to them your hand to the shore, watch them walk into the sea.

Press upon them all they need, see them yearn for all they want.

Gift to them the calm pool of words, watch them draw the sword.

Bless upon them the satiation of peace, see them starve for war.

Grant them darkness and they will lust for light.

Deliver to them death and hear them beg for life.

Beget life and they will murder your kin.

Be as they are and they see you different.

Show wisdom and you are a fool.

The shore gives way to the sea.

And the sea, my friends,

Does not dream of you.

Shake Prayer

Another Hood-damned village, worse than mushrooms after a rain. Proof, if they'd needed it – and they didn't – that they were drawing ever closer to the capital. Hamlets, villages, towns, traffic on the roads and cart trails, the thundering passage of horses, horns sounding in the distance like the howl of wolves closing in for the kill.

'Best life there is,' Fiddler muttered.

'Sergeant?'

He rolled onto his back and studied his exhausted, cutup, blood-stained, wild-eyed excuses for soldiers. What were they now? And what, as they stared back at him, were they seeing? *Their last hope, and if that isn't bad news . . .*

He wondered if Gesler and his squad were still alive. They'd been neatly divided the night before by a clever thrust in strength of Edur, bristling with weapons and sniffing the air like the hounds they had become. Edur on their trail, delivering constant pressure, pushing them ever forward, into what Fiddler damn well knew was a wall of soldiers somewhere ahead – no slipping past when that time came. No squeezing north or south either – the Edur bands filled the north a dozen to a copse and not too far away on the south was the wide Lether River grinning like the sun's own smile. Finally, aye, someone on the other side had got clever, had made the necessary adjustments, had turned this entire invasion into a vast funnel about to drive the Malazans into a meat-grinder.

Well, no fun lasts for ever. After Gesler and his Fifth had been pushed away, there had been sounds of fighting somewhere in that direction. And Fiddler had faced the hard choice between leading his handful of soldiers into a flanking charge to break through and relieve the poor bastards, or staying quiet and hurrying on, east on a southerly tack, right into that waiting maw.

The splitting *cracks* of sharpers had decided him – suicide running into that, since those sharpers tended to fly every which way, and they meant that Gesler and his squad were running, carving a path through the enemy, and Fiddler and his squad might simply end up stumbling into their wake, in the sudden midst of scores of enraged Edur.

*So I left 'em to it. And the detonations died away, but the screams continued, Hood take me.*

Sprawled in the high grasses at the edge of the treeline, his squad. They stank. The glory of the Bonehunters, this taking to the grisliest meaning of that name. *Koryk's curse, aye. Who else?* Severed fingers, ears, pierced through and dangling from belts, harness clasps, rawhide ties. His soldiers: one and all degraded into some ghastly blood-licking barely human

savages. No real surprise there. It was one thing to go covert – as marines this was, after all, precisely what they had been trained to do. But it had gone on too long, without relief, with the only end in sight nothing other than Hood's own gate. Fingers and ears, except for Smiles, who'd added to the mix with that which only males could provide. *'My blecker worms,'* she'd said, referring to some offshore mud-dwelling worm native to the Kanese coast. *'And just like the worms, they start out purple and blue and then after a day or two in the sun they turn grey. Bleckers, Sergeant.'*

Didn't need to lose the path to lose their minds, that much was obvious. *Gods below, look at these fools – how in Hood's name have we lasted this long?*

They'd not seen the captain and her runt of a mage in some time, which didn't bode well. Still, threads of brown telltale smoke drifting around here and there in the mornings, and the faint sounds of munitions at night. So, at least some of them were still alive. But even those signs were growing scarce, when they should have been, if anything, increasing as things got nastier.

*We've run out. We're used up. Bah, listen to me! Starting to sound like Cuttle there. 'I'm ready to die now, Fid. Happy to, aye. Now that I seen—'*

'Enough of that,' he snapped.

'Sergeant?'

'Stop asking me anything, Bottle. And stop looking at me like I've gone mad or something.'

'You'd better not, Sergeant. Go mad, that is. You're the only sane one left.'

'Does that assessment include you?'

Bottle grimaced, then spat out another wad of the grass he'd taken to chewing. Reached for a fresh handful.

*Aye, answer enough.*

'Almost dark,' Fiddler said, eyeing once more the quaint village ahead. Crossroads, tavern and stable, a smithy down the main street, in front of a

huge pile of tailings, and what seemed too many residences, rows of narrow-laned mews, each abode looking barely enough for a small family. Could be there was some other industry, a quarry or potter's manufactury, somewhere on the other side of the village – he thought he could see a gravel road wending up a hill past the eastern edge.

Strangely quiet for dusk. *Workers still chained to their workbenches? Maybe. But still, not even a damned dog in that street.* 'I don't like the looks of this,' he said. 'You sure you smell nothing awry, Bottle?'

'Nothing magical. Doesn't mean there isn't a hundred Edur crouched inside those houses, just waiting for us.'

'So send in a squirrel or something, damn you.'

'I'm looking, Sergeant, but if you keep interrupting me . . .'

'Lord Hood, please sew up the mouths of mages, I implore you.'

'Sergeant, I'm begging you. We've got six squads of Edur less than a league behind us, and I'm damned tired of dodging javelins. Let me concentrate.'

*Aye, concentrate on this fist down your throat, y'damned rat-kisser. Oh, I'm way too tired, way too old. Maybe, if we get through this – hah! – I'll just creep away, vanish into the streets of this Letheras. Retire. Take up fishing. Or maybe knitting. Funeral shawls. Bound to be a thriving enterprise for a while, I'd wager. Once the Adjunct arrives with the rest of us snarly losers and exacts a pleasant revenge for all us dead marines. No, stop thinking that way. We're still alive.*

'Found a cat, Sergeant. Sleeping in the kitchen of that tavern. It's having bad dreams.'

'So become its worse nightmare, Bottle, and quick.'

Birds chirping in the trees behind them. Insects busy living and dying in the grasses around them. The extent of his world now, a tiresome travail punctuated by moments of profound terror. He itched with filth and could smell the stale stench of old fear, like redolent stains in the skin.

*Who in Hood's name are these damned Letherii anyway? So this damned empire with its Edur overlords scrapped with the Malazan Empire. Laseen's problem, not ours. Damn you, Tavore, we get to this point and vengeance ain't enough—*

'Got her,' Bottle said. 'Awake . . . stretching – yes, got to stretch, Sergeant, don't ask me why. All right, three people in the kitchen, all sweating, all rolling their eyes – they look terrified, huddling that way. I hear sounds in the tavern. Someone's singing . . .'

Fiddler waited for more.

And waited.

'Bottle—'

'Slipping into the tavern – ooh, a cockroach! Wait, no, stop playing with it – just eat the damned thing!'

'Keep your voice down, Bottle!'

'Done. Woah, crowded in here. That song . . . up onto the rail, and there—' Bottle halted abruptly, then, swearing under his breath, he rose. Stood for a moment, then snorted and said, 'Come on, Sergeant. We can just walk right on in.'

'Marines holding the village? Spit Hood on a stake, yes!'

The others heard that and as one they were on their feet, crowding round in relief.

Fiddler stared at all the stupid grins and was suddenly sober again. 'Look at you! A damned embarrassment!'

'Sergeant.' Bottle plucked at his arm. 'Fid, trust me, no worries on that front.'

Hellian had forgotten which song she was singing. Whatever it was, it wasn't what everyone else was singing, not that they were still singing, much. Though her corporal was somehow managing a double warble, stretching out some bizarre word in Old Cawn – foreigners shouldn't sing,

since how could people understand them so it could be a mean song, a nasty, insulting song about sergeants, all of which meant her corporal earned that punch in the head and at least the warbling half stopped.

A moment later she realized that the other half had died away, too. And that she herself was the only one still singing, although even to her it sounded like some foreign language was blubbering from her numbed lips – something about sergeants, maybe – well, she could just take out this knife and—

More soldiers suddenly, the tavern even more crowded. Unfamiliar faces that looked familiar and how could that be well it was it just was, so there. Damn, another sergeant – how many sergeants did she have to deal with here in this tavern? First there was Urb, who seemed to have been following her around for weeks now, and then Gesler, staggering in at noon with more wounded than walking. And now here was another one, with the reddish beard and that battered fiddle on his back and there he was, laughing and hugging Gesler like they was long lost brothers or lovers or something – everyone was too damned happy as far as she was concerned. Happier than her, which was of course the same thing.

Things had been better in the morning. Was it this day? Yesterday? No matter. They'd been magicked hard to find – was that Balgrid's doing? Tavos Pond's? And so the three squads of Edur had pretty much walked right on top of them. Which made the killing easier. That wonderful sound of crossbows letting loose. *Thwok! Thwok! Thwokthwokthwok!* And then the swordwork, the in-close stabbing and chopping and slashing then poking and prodding but nope ain't nobody moving any more and that's a relief and being relieved was the happiest feeling.

Until it made you depressed. Standing around surrounded by dead people did that on occasion. The blood on the sword in your hand. The grunt twist and pull of removing quarrels from stubborn muscle, bone and organs. All the flies showing up like they was gathered on a nearby branch just waiting. And the stink of all that stuff poured out of bodies.

Stinking almost as bad as what was on all these marines. Who'd started all that? The fingers and cocks and ears and stuff?

A sudden flood of guilt in Hellian. *It was me!* She stood, reeled, then looked over at the long table that served large parties of travellers, the table that went along the side wall opposite the bar. Edur heads were piled high on it, amidst plenty of buzzing, crawling flies and maggots. *Too heavy on the belt – pulled Maybe's breeches down, hah! No wait, I'm supposed to be feeling bad. There's going to be trouble, because that's what comes when you get nasty with the corpses of your enemies. It just . . . what's the word?* 'Escalates!'

Faces turned, soldiers stared. Fiddler and Gesler who had been slapping each other on the back pulled apart and then walked over.

'Hood's pecker, Hellian,' Fiddler said under his breath, 'what happened to all the townfolk? As if I can't guess,' he added, glancing over at the heaped heads. 'They've all run away.'

Urb had joined them and he said, 'They were all those Indebted we heard about. Fifth, sixth generations. Working on blanks.'

'Blanks?' Gesler asked.

'For weapons,' Fiddler explained. 'So, they were slaves, Urb?'

'In everything but name,' the big man replied, scratching at his beard from which dangled one severed finger, grey and black. 'Under all those Edur heads is the local Factor's head, some rich bastard in silks. We killed him in front of the Indebted and listened to them cheer. And then they cut off the poor fool's head as a gift, since we come in with all these Edur ones. And then they looted what they could and headed out.'

Gesler's brows had risen at all that. 'So you've managed what the rest of us haven't – arriving as damned liberators in this town.'

Hellian snorted. 'We worked that out weeks back. Never mind the Lurrii soljers, since they're all perfessionals and so's they like things jus' fine so's they's the one y'gotta kill no diff 'rent from the Edur. No, y'go into the hamlets and villages and kill all the 'ficials—'

'The what?' Gesler asked.

Urb said, 'Officials. We kill the officials, Gesler. And anybody with money, and the advocates, too.'

'The what?'

'Legal types. Oh, and the money-lenders and debtholders, and the record-keepers and toll-counters. We kill them all—'

'Along with the soljers,' Hellian added, nodding – and nodding, for some reason finding herself unable to stop. She kept nodding as she said, 'An' what happens then is simple. Looting, lotsa sex, then everybody skittles out, and we sleep in soft beds and drink an' eat in the tavern an' if the keepers hang round we pays for it all nice an' honest—'

'Keepers like the ones hiding in the kitchen?'

Hellian blinked. 'Hiding? Oh, maybe we've gotten a little wild –'

'It's the heads,' Urb said, then he shrugged sheepishly. 'We're getting outa hand, Gesler, I think. Living like animals in the woods and the like—'

'Like animals,' Hellian agreed, still nodding. 'In soft beds and lotsa food and drink an' it's not like we carry them heads on our belts or anything. We just leave 'em in the taverns. Every village, right? Jus' to let 'em know we been through.' Unaccountably dizzy, Hellian sat back down, then reached for the flagon of ale on the table – needing to twist Balgrid's fingers from the handle and him fighting as if it was his flagon or something, the idiot. She swallowed a mouthful and leaned back – only it was a stool she was sitting on so there was no back to it, and now she was staring up at the ceiling and puddled whatever was soaking through her ragged shirt all along her back and faces were peering down at her. She glowered at the flagon still in her hand. 'Did I spill? Did I? Did I spill, dammit?'

'Not a drop,' Fiddler said, shaking his head in wonder. This damned Sergeant Hellian, who by Urb's account had crossed all the way from the coast in an inebriated haze – this soft-featured woman, soft just on the edge of dissolute, with the bright always wet lips – this Hellian had managed to succeed where every other squad – as far as Fiddler knew – had failed

miserably. And since Urb was adamant on who was leading whom, it really *had* been her. This drunken, ferocious marine.

*Leaving severed heads in every tavern, for Hood's sake!*

But she had cut loose the common people, all these serfs and slaves and Indebted, and had watched them dance off in joy and freedom. *Our drunk liberator, our bloodthirsty goddess – what in Hood's name do all those people think when they first see her? Endless rumours of a terrible invading army. Soldiers and Edur dying in ambushes, chaos on the roads and trails. Then she shows up, dragging heads in sacks, and her marines break down every door in town and drag out all the ones nobody else has any reason to like. And then? Why, the not-so-subtle cutting away of all burdens for all these poor folk. 'Give us the bar for a couple nights and then we'll just be on our way.*

*'Oh, and if you run into any Edur in the woods, send somebody back to warn us, right?'*

Was it any wonder that Hellian and Urb and their squads had marched so far ahead of the others – or so Captain Sort had complained – with hardly any losses among her marines? The drunk, bright-eyed woman with all the rounded excesses of a well-fed, never sober but still young harlot had somehow managed to co-opt all the local help they'd needed to stay alive.

In a strange kind of floating wonder, the near-euphoria of relief, exhaustion and plenty of admiration that certainly wasn't innocent of sudden sexual desire – *for a damned drunk* – Fiddler found a table and moments later was joined by Gesler and Stormy, the latter arriving with a loaf of rye bread, a broached cask of ale and three dented pewter flagons with inscriptions on them.

'Can almost read this,' he said, squinting at the side of his cup. 'Like old Ehrlii.'

'Maker's stamp?' Gesler asked as he tore off a hunk of bread.

'No. Maybe something like "Advocate of the Year". Then a name. Could be Rizzin Purble. Or Wurble. Or Fizzin.'

'Could be that's the name of this village,' Gesler suggested. 'Fizzin Wurble.'

Stormy grunted, then nudged Fiddler. 'Stop dreaming of her, Fid. She's trouble and a lost cause too. Besides, it's Urb who's all dreamy 'bout her and he looks too dangerous to mess with.'

Fiddler sighed. 'Aye to all of that. It's just been a long time, that's all.'

'We'll get our rewards soon enough.'

He eyed Stormy for a moment, then glanced over to Gesler.

Who was scowling at his corporal. 'You lost your mind, Stormy? The only rewards we're going to reap are the crow feathers Hood hands out as we march through his gate. Sure, we're drawing up here, gaining in strength as we do it, but those Edur on our trail will be doing the same, outnumbering us five, ten to one by the time we run out of open ground.'

Stormy waved a dismissive hand. 'You do a count, Gesler? Look at Urb's squad. At Hellian's. Look at Fid's and ours. We're all damned near unscathed, given what we've been through. More living than dead in every squad here. So who's to say the other squads aren't in the same shape? We're damn near at strength, and you couldn't say that about the Letherii and the Edur, could you?'

'There's a whole lot more of them than us,' Gesler pointed out as he collected the cask and began pouring the ale into the flagons.

'Ain't made that much difference, though. We bulled through that last ambush—'

'And left the scene so cut up and bleeding a vole could've tracked us—'

'Sharper scatter, is all—'

'Mayfly's back was a shredded mess—'

'Armour took most of it—'

'Armour she doesn't have any more—'

'You two are worse than married,' Fiddler said, reaching for his ale.

'All right,' Koryk pronounced, 'there's no disagreement possible. Those bleckers of yours, Smiles, reek the worst of all. Worse than fingers, worse than ears, worse even than tongues. We've all voted. All us in the squad, and you've got to get rid of them.'

Smiles sneered. 'You think I don't know why you want me to toss 'em, Koryk? It's not the smell, oh no. It's the sight of them, and the way that makes you squirm inside, makes your balls pull up and hide. That's what this is all about. Pretty soon, none of us will be smelling much at all – everything's drying out, wrinkling up—'

'Enough,' groaned Tarr.

Koryk glanced across at Bottle. The fool looked to be asleep, his face hanging slack. Well, fair enough. Without Bottle they'd never have come this far. Virtually unscathed at that. He tapped the finger bone strung round his neck – the bone from the pit outside what was left of Y'Ghatan. Always worth a touch or two with thoughts like those.

And he knew they were headed for trouble. They all knew, which was why they'd talk about anything else but that huge grisly beast crouched right there in the forefront of their thoughts. The one with dripping fangs and jagged talons and that smeared grin of knowing. Aye. He touched the bone again.

'Come through not bad,' Cuttle said, eyeing the other marines in the crowded main room. 'Anybody here been thinking about how we're going to besiege a city the size of Unta? We're pretty much out of munitions – Fid's got a cusser left and maybe I do, too, but that's it. We can hardly try anything covert, since they know we're coming—'

'Magic, of course,' Smiles said. 'We'll just walk right in.'

Koryk winced at this turn in the conversation. Besieging Letheras? And nobody standing ranks-deep in their way? Not likely. Besides, the Edur were pushing them right along, and where the marines ended up was not

going to be a pleasure palace, now was it? Had Cuttle lost his mind? Or was this just his way of dealing with the death looming in all their minds?

Probably. The sapper had little or no imagination, and he was making his biggest leap possible all the way to a siege that was never going to happen and wouldn't work anyway if it did, which it wouldn't. But it gave Cuttle something to think about.

'The sergeant will figure something out,' Cuttle concluded suddenly, with a loud sigh, as he settled back in his chair.

*Hah, yes, Fiddler, Lord of the Sappers. Hie and fall on your knees!*

Bottle sat looking through the ever-sharp eyes of a cat. Perched on the ridge of the tavern roof, gaze fixing and tracking on birds whenever the mage's concentration slipped – which was getting too often, but exhaustion did that, didn't it?

But now, there was movement there, along the edge of the forest there – where the squad had been hiding not so long ago. And more, to the north of that. And there, an Edur scout, edging out from the south end, other side of the road. Sniffing the air as was their wont – no surprise, the Malazans carried a carrion reek with them everywhere they went these days.

Oh, they were cautious, weren't they? *They don't want a real engagement. They just want us to bolt. Again. Once their strength's up, they'll show themselves more openly. Show their numbers, lances at the ready.*

A little time yet, then. For the other marines to relax. But not too much, lest they all got so drunk they couldn't stand, much less fight. Although, come to think on it, that Hellian seemed capable of fighting no matter how sodden she got – one of her corporals had talked about how she sobered up and turned into ice whenever the fighting started. Whenever orders needed delivering. That was a singular talent indeed. Her soldiers worshipped her. As did Urb and his squad. Worship all bound up with terror and probably more than a little lust, so a mixed-up kind of worship, which probably made it thick as armour and that was why so many were still alive.

*Hellian, like a more modest version of, say, Coltaine. Or even Dujek during the Genabackan campaigns. Greymane in Korel. Prince K'azz for the Crimson Guard – from what I've heard.*

*But not, alas, the Adjunct. And that's too bad. That's worse than too bad—*

Twenty Tiste Edur visible now, all eyeing the village – ooh, look at that bird! No, that wasn't them. That was the damned cat. He needed to focus.

More of the barbaric warriors appearing. Another twenty. And there, another group as big as the first two combined.

A third one, coming down from due north and maybe even a little easterly —

Bottle shook himself, sat up, blinked across at his fellow marines. 'They're coming,' he said. 'We got to run.'

'How many?' Koryk demanded.

*Three hundred and climbing.* 'Too many—'

'Bottle!'

'Hundreds, damn you!'

He glared around the room, in the sudden silence following his scream. *Well now, that sobered 'em up.*

* * *

Beak's eyes felt full of sand. His tongue was thick in his mouth and he felt slightly nauseous. He wasn't used to keeping a candle lit for so long, but there had been little choice. The Tiste Edur were everywhere now. He had been muffling the sounds of horse hoofs from their mounts, he had been blurring their passage to make them little more than deeper shadows amidst the dappled cascade beneath branches. And he had been reaching out, his every sense awakened to almost painful precision, to find these stealthy hunters as they closed in on their trail. On everyone's trail. And to make matters worse, they were fighting in the same way as the Malazans – fast, vicious clashes, not even worrying about actually killing because wounding

was better. Wounding slowed the marines down. Left blood trails. They cut then withdrew. Then did it all over again, later. Nights and into the days now, so there was no time to rest. Time only to . . . run.

And now he and the captain were riding in daylight, trying to find a way back to Fist Keneb and all the squads that had linked up with his company. Four hundred marines as of two days ago. Beak and the captain had pushed east in an effort to contact those squads that had moved faster and farther than all the others, but they had been driven back – too many Tiste Edur bands in between. He now knew that Faradan Sort feared those squads lost, if not dead already then as good as.

He was also pretty sure that this invasion was not quite going as planned. Something in the look in the captain's dark eyes told him that it wasn't just the two of them who kept stumbling into trouble. They'd found three squads, after all, that had been butchered – oh, they'd charged a high toll for the privilege, as Faradan Sort had said after wandering the glade with its heaps of corpses and studying the blood trails leading off into the woods. Beak could tell just by the silent howl of death roiling in the air, that cold fire that was the breath of every field of battle. A howl frozen like shock into the trees, the trunks, the branches and the leaves. And in the ground underfoot, oozing like sap, and Lily, his sweet bay, didn't want to take a single step into that clearing and Beak knew why.

A high toll, yes, just like she'd said, although of course no real coins were paid. Just lives.

They worked their weary mounts up an embankment all overgrown with bushes, and Beak was forced to concentrate even harder to mute the sounds of scrabbling hoofs and snapping brush, and the candle in his head flared suddenly and he very nearly reeled from his saddle.

The captain's hand reached across and steadied him. 'Beak?'

'It's hot,' he muttered. And now, all at once, he could suddenly see where all this was going, and what he would need to do.

The horses broke the contact between them as they struggled up the last of the ridge.

'Hold,' Faradan Sort murmured.

*Yes.* Beak sighed. 'Just ahead, Captain. We found them.'

A score of trees had been felled and left to rot directly ahead, and on this side of that barrier was a scum-laden pool on which danced glittering insects. Two marines smeared in mud rose from the near side of the bank, crossbows at the ready.

The captain raised her right hand and made a sequence of gestures, and the crossbows swung away and they were waved forward.

There was a mage crouched in a hollow beneath one of the felled trees, and she gave Beak a nod that seemed a little nervous. He waved back as they reined in ten paces from the pool.

The mage called out from her cover: 'Been expecting you two. Beak, you got a glow so bright it's damned near blinding.'

Then she laughed. 'Don't worry, it's not the kind the Edur can see, not even their warlocks. But I'd dampen it down some, Beak, lest you burn right up.'

The captain turned to him and nodded. 'Rest now, Beak.'

*Rest? No, there could be no rest. Not ever again.* 'Sir, there are hundreds of Edur coming. From the northwest—'

'We know,' the other mage said, clambering out like a toad at dusk. 'We was just getting ready to pack our travelling trunks and the uniforms are pressed and the standards restitched in gold.'

'Really?'

She sobered and there was a sudden soft look in her eyes, reminding Beak of that one nurse his mother had hired, the one who was then raped by his father and had to go away. 'No, Beak, just havin' fun.'

Too bad, he considered. He would like to have seen that gold thread.

They dismounted and walked their horses round one end of the felled trees, and there, before them, was the Fist's encampment. 'Hood's mercy,'

Faradan Sort said, 'there's more.'

'Six hundred and seventy-one, sir,' Beak said. And like the mage had said, there were getting ready to leave, swarming like ants on a kicked mound. There had been wounded – lots of them – but the healers had done their work and all the blood smelled old and the smell of death stayed where it belonged, close to the dozen graves on the far side of the clearing.

'Come along,' said the captain as two soldiers arrived to take charge of the horses, and Beak followed her as she made her way to where stood Fist Keneb and Sergeant Thom Tissy.

It felt strange to be walking after so long seated in those strange Letherii saddles, as if the ground was crumbling underfoot, and everything looked oddly fragile. *Yes. My friends. All of them.*

'How bad?' Keneb asked Faradan Sort.

'We couldn't reach them,' she replied, 'but there is still hope. Fist, Beak says we have to hurry.'

The Fist glanced at Beak and the young mage nearly wilted. Attention from important people always did that to him.

Keneb nodded, then sighed. 'I want to keep waiting, in case . . .' He shook his head. 'Fair enough. It's time to change tactics.'

'Yes sir,' said the captain.

'We push hard. For the capital, and if we run into anything we can't handle . . . we handle it.'

'Yes sir.'

'Captain, gather ten squads with full complement of heavies. Take command of our rearguard.'

'Yes sir.' She turned and took Beak by the arm. 'I want you on a stretcher, Beak,' she said as she led him along. 'Sleeping.'

'I can't, sir—'

'You will.'

'No, I really can't. The candles, they won't go out. Not any more. They won't go out.' *Not ever, Captain, and it isn't that I don't love you because I do and I'd do anything you asked. But I just can't and I can't even explain. Only, it's too late.*

He wasn't sure what she saw in his eyes, wasn't sure how much of all that he didn't say got heard anyway, but the grip of her hand on his arm loosened, became almost a caress, and she nodded and turned her head away. 'All right, Beak. Help us guard Keneb's back, then.'

'Yes sir, I will. You just watch me, I will.' He waited a moment, as they walked side by side through the camp, and then asked, 'Sir, if there's something we can't handle how do we handle it anyway?'

She either grunted or laughed from the same place that grunts came from. 'Sawtooth wedges and keep going, Beak. Throw back whatever is thrown at us. Keep going, until . . .'

'Until what?'

'It's all right, Beak, to die alongside your comrades. It's all right. Do you understand me?'

'Yes sir, I do. It is all right, because they're my friends.'

'That's right, Beak.'

*And that's why no-one needs to worry, Captain.*

Keneb watched as his marines fell into formation. Fast march, now, as if these poor souls weren't beat enough. But they couldn't dart and hide any more. The enemy had turned the game round and they had the advantage in numbers and maybe, finally, they were also a match for the ferocity of his Malazans.

It had been inevitable. No empire just rolls over, legs splaying. After enough pokes and jabs, it turns and snarls and then the fangs sink deep. And now it was his marines who were doing the bleeding. *But not nearly as bad as I'd feared. Look at them, Keneb. Looking meaner than ever.*

'Fist,' Thom Tissy said beside him, 'they're ready for you.'

'I see that, Sergeant.'

'No sir. I meant, *they're ready*.'

Keneb met the squat man's dark, beady eyes, and wasn't sure what he saw in them. Whatever it was, it burned bright.

'Sir,' Thom Tissy said, 'it's what we're meant for. All' – he waved one grimy hand – 'this. Trained to play more than one game, right? We stuck 'em enough to get 'em riled up and so here they are, all those damned Edur drawn right to us like we was a lodestone. Now we're about to knock 'em off balance all over again, and Hood take me, it's got my blood up! Same for us all! So, please, sir, sound us the order to march.'

Keneb stared at the man a moment longer, then he nodded.

To the sound of laughter, Koryk barrelled into the three Edur warriors, his heavy longsword hammering aside two of the out-thrust spears jabbing for his midsection. With his left hand he caught the shaft of the third one and used it to pull himself forward. Edge of his blade into the face of the warrior on his right – not deep enough to cause serious damage, but enough to spray blinding blood. Against the one in the middle, Koryk dropped one shoulder and hit him hard in the centre of his chest – hard enough to lift the Edur from his feet and send him sprawling back. Still gripping the third spear, Koryk twisted the warrior round and drove the point of his sword into the Edur's throat.

Koryk spun to slash at the first warrior, only to see her tumble back with a throwing knife skewering one eye socket. So he lunged after the middle Edur, sword chopping down in a frenzy until the Edur's smashed-up arms – raised to fend off the attack – fell away, freeing the half-blood Seti to deliver a skull-crushing blow.

Then he whirled. *'Will you in Hood's name stop that laughing!'*

But Smiles was on one knee, convulsing with hilarity even as she pulled out her throwing knife. 'Gods! I can't breathe! Wait – just wait—'

Snarling, Koryk turned to face the cloister again – these narrow-laned mews created perfect cul-de-sacs – lead them in at a run, flank out then turn and cut the bastards down. Even so, nobody had planned on making this ugly village the site of their last stand. Except maybe the Edur, who now entirely surrounded it and were working their way in, house by house, lane by lane.

Felt good kicking back, though, whenever they got too spread out in their eagerness to spill Malazan blood.

'They stink at fighting in groups,' Smiles said, coming up alongside him. She glanced up into his face and then burst out laughing again.

'What's so funny?'

'You! Them! The look in their eyes – the surprise, I mean, oh, gods of the deep! I can't stop!'

'You'd better,' Koryk warned, shaking the blood from his sword. 'I'm hearing movement – that lane mouth there – come on.'

* * *

Three quarrels flitted out, two of them taking down onrushing Edur. Two lances arced in retaliation, both darting straight for Fiddler. And then Tarr's huge shield shifted into their path, and the sergeant was pushed hard to one side – grunts from the corporal as both lances slammed solidly against the bronze-scaled face, one of them punching through a finger's length to pierce Tarr's upper arm. The corporal swore.

Fiddler ducked down behind the smithy's quenching barrel as a third lance cracked into it. Water gushed out onto the ground.

The crossfire ambush then caught the half-dozen charging Edur unawares – quarrels sleeting out from the narrow alley mouths on both sides. Moments later all were down, dead or dying.

'Pull back!' Fiddler shouted, turning to exchange his unloaded crossbow for the loaded one Bottle now set into his hands.

Tarr covering the three of them, they retreated back through the smithy, across the dusty compound with its piled tailings and slag, through the kicked-down fence, and back towards the tavern.

Where, from the sounds, Stormy and his heavies were in a fight.

Motion on their flanks – the rest of the ambush converging.

Cuttle, Corabb, Maybe, Gesler, Balgrid and Brethless. Reloading on the run.

'Gesler! Stormy's—'

'I can hear it, Fid! Corabb – hand that damned crossbow over to Brethless – you're useless with it. Join up with Tarr there and you two in first!'

'I got my target!' Corabb protested even as he gave one of Hellian's corporals the heavy weapon.

'By bouncing your quarrel off the cobbles and don't tell me that was a planned shot!'

Corabb was already readying the Edur spear he had picked up.

Fiddler waved Tarr forward as soon as Corabb arrived. 'Go, you two! Fast in and hard!'

Only by leaving his feet and throwing his entire weight on the shaft was the Edur able to drive the spear entirely through Stormy's left shoulder. An act of extraordinary courage that was rewarded with a thumb in his left eye – that dug yet deeper, then deeper still. Shrieking, the warrior tried to jerk his head away, but the huge red-bearded corporal now clutched a handful of hair and was holding him tight.

With a still louder shriek and even greater courage, the Edur tore his head back, leaving Stormy with a handful of scalp and a thumb smeared in gel and blood.

'Not so fast,' the corporal said in a strangely matter-of-fact tone, as he lunged forward to grapple the Edur. Both went down onto the smeared floorboards of the tavern – and the impact pushed the spear in Stormy's

shoulder almost entirely through. Drawing his gutting knife, Stormy drove the blade into the warrior's side, just beneath the ribcage, under the heart, then cut outward.

Blood gushed in a flood.

Staggering, slipping, Stormy managed to regain his feet – the spear falling from his back – and tottered until he came up against the table with its pile of severed Edur heads. He reached for one and threw it across the room, into the crowd of Edur pushing in through the doorway where Flashwit and Bowl had been holding position until a spear skewered Bowl through the man's neck and someone knocked off Flashwit's helm and laid open her head. She was lying on her back, not moving as the moccasin-clad feet of the Edur stamped all over her in the inward rush.

The head struck the lead warrior in the face, and he howled in shock and pain, reeling to one side.

Mayfly stumbled up to take position beside Stormy. Stabbed four times already, it was a wonder the heavy was still standing.

'Don't you die, woman,' Stormy rumbled.

She set his sword into his hands. 'Found this, Sergeant, and thought you might want it.'

There was no time to answer as the first three Edur reached them.

Emerging from the kitchen entrance – a kitchen now emptied of serving staff – Corabb saw that charge, and he leapt forward to take it from the flank.

And tripped headlong over the body of the Edur that Stormy had just stabbed. His hands went forward, still holding the spear. The point drove through the right thigh of the nearest warrior, missing the bone, and plunged out the other side to stab into the next Edur's left knee, the triangular head sliding under the patella and neatly separating the joint on its way through. Angling downward, the point sticking fast between two floorboards, until the far one sprang loose, in time to foul the steps of the third Edur, and that warrior seemed to simply throw himself onto Stormy's out-thrust sword.

As Corabb landed amidst falling enemy, Tarr arrived, his shortsword hacking down here and there as he worked forward to plant himself in the path of the rest of the Edur.

Flashwit then stood up in their midst and she had a kethra knife in each hand.

Fiddler led the charge through the kitchen doorway, crossbow ready, to find Tarr cutting down the last standing Edur. The room was piled with bodies, only a few still moving, and crawling out from beneath two Edur corpses was Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, coughing in all the blood that had spilled over him.

Brethless moved past to the window. 'Sergeant! Another mob of 'em!'

'Crossbows up front!' Fiddler snapped.

Hellian squinted across the street at the fancy house. The Factor's house, she recalled. Had that look. Expensive, tasteless. She pointed with a dripping sword. 'Over in there, that's where we'll make our stand.'

Urb grunted, then spat out a red stream – taken to chewing betel nut, maybe. The things some people would do to their bodies beggared belief. She drank down another mouthful of the local whatever that tasted like bamboo shoots some dog had pissed on, but what a kick. Then waved him forward.

And then the others, except for Lutes and Tavos Pond who'd both been cut to pieces trying to hold a flank at that alley mouth back there. 'I'll take up rearguard,' she said by way of explanation as the six remaining marines staggered past. 'In a smart line, now!'

Another mouthful. Just got worse, this stuff. Who would come up with a drink like that?

She set out. Was halfway there or maybe just halfway along when a hundred or so Tiste Edur appeared thirty or so paces down the main street. So she threw the clay bottle away and planted her feet to meet the charge. Was what rearguard did, right? Hold 'em back.

The first row, about ten of them, halted and raised their lances.

'Not fair!' Hellian shouted, pulling her shield up and getting ready to duck behind it – oh, this wasn't a shield at all. It was the lid of an ale cask, the kind with a handle. She stared at it. 'Hey, I wasn't issued this.'

Three straight days and nights on the run from the river bank and now the sounds of fighting somewhere ahead. Since he'd lost his corporal two nights past – the fool fell down an abandoned well, one moment there at his side, the next gone. Went through a net of roots at least most of the way, until he jammed his head and pop went the neck and wasn't it funny how Hood never forgot since it'd been join the marines or dance the gibbet for the corporal and now the fool had done both. Since Badan Gruk lost his corporal, then, he now dragged Ruffle with him – not quite a promotion, Ruffle was not the promoting type, but she kept a cool eye when she wasn't busy eating everything in sight.

And now it was with a wheeze that Ruffle settled down beside Badan Gruk, 5th Squad sergeant, 3rd Company, 8th Legion, and lifted her pale rounded face up to his with that cold grey regard. 'We're kind of tired, Sergeant.'

Badan Gruk was Dal Honese, but not from the north savanna tribes. He had been born in the south jungle, half a day from the coast. His skin was as black as a Tiste Andii's, and the epicanthic folds of his eyes were so pronounced that little more than slits of white were visible; and he was not a man to smile much. He felt most comfortable on moonless nights, although Skim always complained about how their sergeant just damn disappeared, usually when he was needed the most.

But now here they were, in bright daylight, and oh how Badan Gruk wished for the gloom of the tropical rainforest of his homeland. 'Stay here, Ruffle,' he now said, then turned and scrabbled back to where Sergeant Primly crouched with the rest of the marines. Primly's squad, the 10th, was also but one short, while the 4th was down two, including Sergeant Sinter and that sent yet another pang through Badan Gruk. She'd been from his own tribe, after all. Damn, she'd been the reason he'd joined up in the first place. Following Sinter had always been way too easy.

Drawing close, Badan Gruk waved Primly over and the Quon noble's corporal, Hunt, tagged along. The three settled a short distance from the others. 'So,' Badan breathed, 'do we go round this?'

Primly's long ascetic face soured, which is what it always did whenever anyone spoke to him. Badan wasn't too sure of the man's history, beyond the obvious, which was that Primly had done something bad, once – bad enough to get him disowned and maybe even on the run. At least he'd left the highborn airs behind. To Badan's whispered question, Corporal Hunt snorted, then looked away.

'You're here,' Badan said to the Kartoolii, 'so talk.'

Hunt shrugged. 'We been running since the river, Sergeant. Ducking and dodging till all three of our mages are used up and worse than walking dead.' He nodded northwards. 'Those are marines up there, and they're in a fight. We're only down one heavy and one sapper—'

'And a sergeant and a corporal,' Badan added.

'Seventeen of us, Sergeant. Now, I seen what your heavies can do, and both me and Sergeant Primly can tell you that Lookback, Drawfirst and Shoaly are easy matches to Reliko and Vastly Blank. And Honey's still got three cussers and half again all the sharpers since Kisswhere left 'em behind when she and Sinter went and—'

'All right,' Badan cut in, not wanting to hear again what had happened to Sinter and Kisswhere, since it had been Kisswhere who had been the reason for Sinter's joining. Nothing good following a woman who was following another woman with worship in her eyes – even a sister – but that had been that and they were both gone now, weren't they? 'Primly?'

The Quon rubbed at what passed for a beard on his face – gods, showed just how young the poor bastard was – and cast a searching gaze back on the waiting soldiers. Then he smiled suddenly. 'Look at Skulldeath, Badan. Here we got a soldier that Toothy himself named first day on Malaz Island, and I still don't know – was it a joke? Skulldeath's yet to draw a drop of blood, barring mosquitoes and that blood was his own. Besides, Badan Gruk, you've got what looks like some kind of Dal Honese grand council

here and you moonless nightshades seem to put holy terror in the Edur, like you were ghosts or something and sometimes I start wondering myself, the way you all manage to vanish in the dark. In any case, there's you, Nep Furrow, Reliko and Neller and Strap Mull and Mulvan Dreader's halfway there besides, and, well, we've come to fight, haven't we? So let's fight.'

*Maybe you came to fight, Primly. I'm just trying to stay alive.* Badan Gruk studied the two men beside him for a moment longer, then he rose to his full height, coming to very nearly Primly's shoulder, and drew out the two-handed sickle sword from its deer-hide harness on his broad back. Adjusting his grip on the ivory handle, he eyed the two thin otataral blades inset on both sides of the curved and carved tusk. *Vethbela*, the weapon was called in his own language, *Bonekisser*, the blades not deep enough to do more than touch the long bones of a normal warrior's legs, since those femurs were prized trophies, to be polished and carved with scenes of the owner's glorious death – and any warrior seeking the heart of a woman needed to place more than a few at the threshold of her family's hut, as proof of his prowess and courage.

*Never did manage to use this thing properly, did I? Not a single thigh bone to show Sinter.* He nodded. 'Time to collect some trophies, then.'

Fifteen paces away, Honey nudged Skim. 'Hey, beloved, looks like we get to toss sharpers today.'

'Stop calling me that,' the other sapper replied in a bored tone, but she watched as Badan Gruk headed back up to where Ruffle hid, and she watched as Corporal Hunt went back down-trail to collect the 4th Squad's corporal, Pravalak Rim, who had been guarding their butts with Shoaly and Drawfirst. And pretty soon something less than whispered was dancing through every soldier and she saw weapons being drawn, armour straps tightened, helms adjusted, and finally she grunted. 'All right, Honey – Hood take me, how I hate saying that – looks like you've sniffed it just right—'

'Just let me prove it—'

'You're never prying my legs apart, Honey. Why don't you get that?'

'What a miserable attitude,' the 10th's sapper complained as he loaded his crossbow. 'Now Kisswhere, she was—'

'So tired of your advances, Honey, that she went and blew herself up – and took her sister with her, too. And now here I am wishing I'd been with them in that scull.' With that she rose and scrabbled over to Nep Furrow.

The old Dal Honese mage lifted one yellowy eye to squint at her, then both eyes opened wide when he saw the sharper she held in each hand. 'Eggit'way fra meen, tit-woman!'

'Relax,' she said, 'we're heading into a fight. You got anything left in that bent reed of yours?'

'Wha'?'

'Magicks, Nep, magicks – comes from the bleckers in men. Every woman knows that,' and she winked.

'You teasin' tit-woman you! Eggit'way fra meen!'

'I'm not eggitin' away from you, Nep, until you bless these two sharpers here.'

'Bliss 'em clay balls? Ya mad, tit-woman? Less time I done that—'

'They blew up, aye. Sinter and Kisswhere. Into pieces but nice and quick, right? Listen, it's my only way to escape Honey's advances. No, seriously, I want one of your blissin' curses or cursed blissin's. Please, Nep—'

'Eggit'way fra meen!'

Reliko, who was half a hand shorter even than his sergeant and therefore, by Toothy's own assertion, the smallest heavy infantry soldier in the history of the Malazan Empire, grunted upright and drew out his shortsword as he swung his shield into position. He glanced over at Vastly Blank. 'Time again.'

The oversized Seti warrior, still sitting on the bed of wet moss, looked up. 'Huh?'

'Fighting again.'

'Where?'

'Us, Vastly. Remember Y'Ghatan?'

'No.'

'Well, won't be like Y'Ghatan. More like yesterday only harder. Remember yesterday?'

Vastly Blank stared a moment longer, then he laughed his slow *ha ha ha* laugh and said, 'Yesterday! I remember yesterday!'

'Then pick up your sword and wipe the mud off it, Vastly. And take your shield – no, not mine, yours, the one on your back. Yes, bring it round. That's it – no, sword in the other hand. There, perfect. You ready?'

'Who do I kill?'

'I'll show you soon enough.'

'Good.'

'Seti should never breed with bhederin, I think.'

'What?'

'A joke, Vastly.'

'Oh. Ha ha ha! Ha.'

'Let's go join up with Lookback – we'll be on point.'

'Lookback's on point?'

'He's always on point for this kind of thing, Vastly.'

'Oh. Good.'

'Drawfirst and Shoaly at our backs, right? Like yesterday.'

'Right. Reliko, what happened yesterday?'

Strap Mull stepped close to Neller and they both eyed their corporal, Pravalak Rim, who was just sending Drawfirst and Shoaly up to the other heavies.

The two soldiers spoke in their native Dal Honese. 'Broke-hearted,' Strap said.

'Broker than broke,' Neller agreed.

'Kisswhere, she was lovely.'

'Lovelier than lovely.'

'Like Badan says, though.'

'Like he says, yes.'

'And that's that, is what he says.'

'I know that, Strap, you don't need to tell me anything. You think Letheras will be like Y'Ghatan? We didn't do nothing in Y'Ghatan. And,' Neller suddenly added, as if struck by something, 'we haven't done nothing here either, have we? Nothing not yet, anyway. If it's going to be like Y'Ghatan, though—'

'We're not even there yet,' Strap Mull said. 'Which sword you going to use?'

'This one.'

'The one with the broken handle?'

Neller looked down, frowned, then threw the weapon into the bushes and drew out another one. 'This one. It's Letherii, was on the cabin wall—'

'I know. I gave it to you.'

'You gave it to me because it howls like a wild woman every time I hit something with it.'

'That's right, Neller, and that's why I asked what sword you were going to use.'

'Now you know.'

'Now I know so I'm stuffing my ears with moss.'

'Thought they already were.'

'I'm adding more. See?'

Corporal Pravalak Rim was a haunted man. Born in a northern province of Gris to poor farmers, he had seen nothing of the world for most of his life, until the day a marine recruiter had come through the nearby village on the very day Pravalak was there with his older brothers, all of whom sneered at the marine on their way to the tavern. But Pravalak himself, well, he had stared in disbelief. His first sight of someone from Dal Hon. She had been big and round and though she was decades older than him and her hair had gone grey he could see how she had been beautiful and indeed, to his eyes, she still was.

Such dark skin. Such dark eyes, and oh, she spied him out and gave him that gleaming smile, before leading him by the hand into a back room of the local gaol and delivering her recruiting pitch sitting on him and rocking with exalted glee until he exploded right into the Malazan military.

His brothers had expressed their disbelief and were in a panic about how to explain to their ma and da how their youngest son had gone and got himself signed up and lost his virginity to a fifty-year-old demoness in the process – and was, in fact, not coming home at all. But that was their problem, and Pravalak had trundled off in the recruiter's wagon, one hand firmly snuggled between her ample legs, without a backward look.

That first great love affair had lasted the distance to the next town, where he'd found himself transferred onto a train of about fifty other Grisian farm boys and girls and marching an imperial road down to Unta, and from there out to Malaz Island for training as a marine. But he had not been as heartbroken as he would have thought, for the Malazan forces were crowded for a time with Dal Honese recruits – some mysterious population explosion or political upheaval had triggered an exodus from the savanna and jungles of Dal Hon. And he had soon realized that his worship of midnight skin and midnight eyes did not doom him to abject longing and eternal solitude.

Until he first met Kisswhere, who had but laughed at his attempts, as smooth and honed as they had become by then. And it was this rejection that stole his heart for all time.

Yet what haunted him now was, perhaps surprisingly, not all of that unrequited adoration. It was what he had seen, or maybe but imagined, in that dark night on the river, after the blinding flash of the munitions and the roar that shook the water, that one black-skinned hand, reaching up out of the choppy waves, the spinning swirl of the current awakening once more in the wake of the tumult, parting round the elegant wrist – and then that hand slipped away, or was simply lost to his straining sight, his desperate, anguished search in the grainy darkness – the hand, the skin, the dark, dark skin that so defeated him that night . . .

Oh, he wanted to die, now. To end his misery. She was gone. Her sister was gone, too – a sister who had drawn him to one side just two nights earlier and had whispered in his ear, *'Don't give up on her, Prav. I know my sister, you see, and there's a look growing in her eyes when she glances your way . . . so, don't give up . . .'*

Both gone, and that, as Badan repeated again and again when he thought no-one else was close enough to hear him, *is that. And that is that.*

Sergeant Primly came up then and slapped Pravalak on one shoulder. 'Ready, Corporal? Good. Lead your squad, just like Sinter would've done. Lead 'em, Prav, and let's go gut some Edur.'

Skulldeath, whose name had once been Tribole Futan, last surviving male of the Futani royal line of the Gilani tribe of southeast Seven Cities, slowly straightened as he watched the heavies work their way up the slope towards the sounds of fighting.

He readied his two Gilani tulwars, which had once belonged to a Falah'dan champion – his great-uncle – who had fallen to an assassin's poison three years before the Malazan invasion, when Tribole had been a child not yet cast out onto the mortal sands. Weapons he had inherited as last of the line in a family shattered by a feud, such as were common throughout all of Seven Cities before the conquest. The tulwars seemed large in his hands, almost oversized for his wrists – but he was Gilani and his tribe were a people characterized by bodies virtually devoid of fat. Muscles like ropes, long, gracile and far stronger than they appeared.

The softness of his feminine eyes did not change as he studied the tulwars, remembering when he had been a very young child and these weapons, if balanced on their curved tips, could be made to stand if he set the silver pommels into his armpits, and, gripping the handles just above the hilts, he would pitch himself round the camp like an imp with but one leg. Not long after that, he was using weighted sticks carved to match these tulwars of his great-uncle's. Working the patterns in the Gilani style, both afoot and atop a desert horse where he learned to perch on the balls of his feet and practise the lishgar efhanah, the leaping attack, the Edged Net. Many a night with bruised shoulders, then, until he learned how to roll clean after the mid-air attack was done, the three stuffed-grass dummies each sliced into pieces, the wind plucking at those golden grasses as they drifted in the dusty air. And he, rolling, upright once more, weapons at the ready.

He was not tall. He was not outspoken and his smile – rare as it was – was as shy as a young maiden's. Men wanted him in their beds. So did women. But he was of the royal line, and his seed was the last seed, and one day he would give it to a queen, perhaps even an empress, as befitted his true station. In the meantime, he would let men use him as they would, and even find pleasure in that, harmless as it was. But he refused to spill his seed.

He stood now, and when the signal was given, he moved forward, light on his feet.

Skulldeath was twenty-three years old. Such was his discipline that he had not spilled seed once, not even in his sleep.

As the squad mage Mulvan Dreader would say later, Skulldeath was truly a man about to explode.

And a certain Master Sergeant on Malaz Island had got it right. Again.

Urb ran back from the Factor's house as fast as he could, angling his shield to cover his right shoulder. The damned woman! Standing there with a damned cask lid with a flight of lances about to wing her way. Oh, her soldiers worshipped her all right, and so blind was that worship that not one of them could see all that Urb did just to keep the fool woman alive. He was

exhausted and a nervous wreck besides and now – this time – it looked as if he would be too late.

Five paces from Hellian and out went a half-dozen lances, two winging to intercept Urb. Skidding as he pivoted round behind his shield, he lost sight of her.

One lance darted past a hand's width from his face. The other struck true against the shield, the iron head punching through to impale his upper arm, pinning it to his side. The impact spun Urb round and he staggered as the lance pulled at him, and, grunting, he slid down on his knees, the hard cobbles driving shocks up his legs. He slammed his sword-hand down – still clutching the weapon – to keep from pitching forward, and heard a knuckle crack.

At that instant, the world exploded white.

Four lances speeding Hellian's way came close to sobering her up. Crouching, she lifted her flimsy, undersized shield, only to have it hammered from her hand in a splintering concussion that sent it spinning, the snapped foreshafts of two lances buried deep in the soaked, heavy, wonderful-smelling wood. Then her helm was torn from her head with a deafening clang, even as she was struck a glancing blow on her right shoulder that ripped away the leather shingles of her armour. That impact turned her right round so that she faced up the street, and, upon seeing the clay bottle she had thrown away moments earlier, she dived towards it.

Better to die with one last mouthful—

The air above her whistled as she sailed through the air and she saw maybe a dozen lances flit overhead.

She slammed chest-first on the dusty cobbles, all breath punched from her lungs and stared, bug-eyed, as the bottle leapt of its own accord into the air. Then she was lifted by her feet and flipped straight over to thump hard on her back, and above her the blue sky was suddenly grey with dust and gravel, stone chips, red bits, all raining down.

She could not hear a thing, and that first desperate breath was so thick with dust that she convulsed in a fit of coughing. Twisting onto her side, she saw Urb maybe six paces away. The idiot had got himself skewered and looked even more stunned than usual. His face was white with dust except the blood on his lips from a tooth gash, and he was staring dumbly down the street to where all the Edur were – might be they were charging them now so she'd better find her sword—

She'd just sat up when a hand slapped her shoulder and she glared up at an unfamiliar face – a Kanese woman frowning intently at her. With a voice that seemed far away she said, 'Still with us, Sergeant? You shouldn't ever be that close to a cusser, you know.'

And then she was gone.

Hellian blinked. She squinted down the street and saw an enormous crater where the Edur had been. And body parts, and drifting dust and smoke.

And four more marines, two of them Dal Honese, loosing quarrels into a side street then scattering as one of them threw a sharper in the same direction.

Hellian crawled over to Urb.

He'd managed to pull the lance out of his arm which had probably hurt, and there was plenty of blood now, pooling beneath him. His eyes had the look of a butchered cow though maybe not as dead as that but getting there.

Another marine arrived, another stranger. Black-haired, pale skin. He knelt down beside Urb.

'You,' Hellian said.

The man glanced over. 'None of your wounds look to kill you, Sergeant. But your friend here is going fast, so let me do my work.'

'What squad, damn you?'

'Tenth. Third Company.'

A healer. Well, good. Fix Urb right up so she could kill him. 'You're Nathii, aren't you?'

'Sharp woman,' he muttered as he began weaving magic over the huge torn hole in Urb's upper arm. 'Probably even sharper when you're sober.'

'Never count on that, Cutter.'

'I'm not really a cutter, Sergeant. I'm a combat mage, but we can't really be picky about those things any more, can we? I'm Mulvan Dreader.'

'Hellian. Eighth Squad, the Fourth.'

He shot her a sudden look. 'Really. You one of the ones crawled out under Y'Ghatan?'

'Yeah. Urb's gonna live?'

The Nathii nodded. 'Be on a stretcher for a while, though. All the lost blood.' He straightened and looked round. 'Where are the rest of your soldiers?'

Hellian looked over at the Factor's house. The cusser explosion seemed to have knocked it flat. She grunted. 'Damned if I know, Mulvan. You don't happen to have a flask of something on you, do you?'

But the mage was frowning at the wreckage of the collapsed house. 'I hear calls for help,' he said.

Hellian sighed. 'Guess you found 'em after all, Mulvan Dreader. Meaning we're gonna have to dig 'em out.' Then she brightened. 'But that'll work us up a thirst now, won't it?'

The multiple *crack* of sharpers outside the tavern and the biting snap of shrapnel striking the building's front sent the Malazans inside flinching back. Screams erupted outside, wailing up into the street's dust-filled air. Fiddler watched Gesler grab Stormy to keep him from charging out there – the huge Falari was reeling on his feet – then he turned to Mayfly, Corabb and Tarr. 'Let's meet our allies, then, but stay sharp. Rest of you, stay here, bind wounds – Bottle, where's Koryk and Smiles?'

But the mage shook his head. 'They went east side of the village, Sergeant.'

'All right, you three with me, then. Bottle – can you do something for Stormy?'

'Aye.'

Fiddler readied his crossbow, then led the way to the tavern entrance. At the threshold he crouched down, peering through the dust.

Allies all right. Blessed marines, a half-dozen, walking through the sprawled Edur bodies and silencing the screamers with quick thrusts of their swords. Fiddler saw a sergeant, South Dal Honese, short and wide and black as onyx. The woman at his side was half a head taller, pale-skinned and grey-eyed, and nearly round but in a way that had yet to sag. Behind these two stood another Dal Honese, this one wrinkled with pierced everything – ears, nose, wattle, cheeks – the gold ornaments a startling contrast to his dark scowling face. *A damned shaman.*

Fiddler approached, his eyes on the sergeant. There was fighting still going on, but nowhere close. 'How many of you?'

'Seventeen to start,' the man replied. He paused to look down at the barbaric tusk-sword in his hands. 'Just took off an Edur's head with this,' he said, then looked up. 'My first kill.'

Fiddler gaped. 'How in Hood's name did you get this far from the damned coast, then? What are you all, Soletaken bats?'

The Dal Honese grimaced. 'We stole a fisher boat and sailed up.'

The woman at his side spoke. 'We were the southmost squads, moving east till we hit the river, then it was either wading waist-deep in swamp muck or taking to the water. Worked fine until a few nights ago, when we ran straight into a Letherii galley. We lost a few that night,' she added.

Fiddler stared at her a moment longer. All round and soft-looking, except for those eyes. *Hood take me, this one could pluck the skin off a man one*

*tiny strip at a time with one hand while doing herself with the other.* He looked away, back to the sergeant. 'What company?'

'Third. I'm Badan Gruk, and you're Fiddler, aren't you?'

'Yeggetan,' muttered the shaman with a warding gesture.

Badan Gruk turned to the pale woman. 'Ruffle, take Vastly and Reliko and work west until you meet up with Primly. Then back here.' He faced Fiddler again. 'We caught 'em good, I think.'

'Thought I heard a cusser a while back.'

A nod. 'Primly had the sappers. Anyway, the Edur pulled back, so I suppose we scared 'em.'

'Moranth munitions will do that.'

Badan Gruk glanced away again. He seemed strangely skittish. 'We never expected to run into any squads this far east,' he said. 'Not unless they took to the water like we did.' He met Fiddler's eyes. 'You're barely a day from Letheras, you know.'

Seven Edur had turned the game on Koryk and Smiles, pushing them into a less than promising lane between decrepit, leaning tenements, that then led to a most quaint killing ground blocked by stacks of timber on all sides but the one with the alley mouth.

Pushing Smiles behind him as he backed away from the Edur – who crowded the alley, slowly edging forward – Koryk readied his sword. Hand-and-a-half fighting now that he'd lost his shield. If the bastards threw lances, he'd be in trouble.

The thought made him snort. Him against seven Tiste Edur and all he had behind him was a young woman who'd used up all her throwing knives and was left with a topheavy gutter that belonged in the hands of a butcher. Trouble? Only if they threw lances.

But these Edur weren't interested in skewering them from a distance. They wanted to close, and Koryk was not surprised by that. *Like Seti, these grey gaunts. Face to face, aye. That is where true glory is found.* As they

reached the mouth of the alley, Koryk lifted the tip of his sword and waved them forward.

'Stay right back,' he said to Smiles who crouched behind him. 'Give me plenty of room—'

'To do what, you oaf? Die in style? Just cut a few and I'll slide in low and finish 'em.'

'And get a pommel through the top of your head? No, stay back.'

'I ain't staying back t'get raped by all the ones you were too incompetent to kill before dying yourself, Koryk.'

'Fine! *I'll* punch my pommel through your thick skull, then!'

'Only time you're ever gettin' inside of me, so go ahead and enjoy it.'

'Oh, believe me, I will—'

They might have gone on, and on, but the Edur had fanned out, four in front and three behind, and now they rushed forward.

Koryk and Smiles argued often, later, about whether their saviour descended on wings or just had a talent for leaping extraordinary distances, for he arrived in a blur, sailing right across the path of the first four Tiste Edur, and in that silent flight he seemed to writhe, amidst flashing heavy iron blades. A flurry of odd *snicking* sounds and then the man was past – and should have collided badly with a stack of rough-barked wood. Instead, one of those tulwars touched down tip first on a log, and pivoting on that single point of contact the man twisted round to land in a cat-like crouch against the slope of timbers – at an impossible to maintain angle, but that didn't matter since he was already springing back the way he had come, this time sailing over the collapsing, blood-drenched forms of four Tiste Edur. *Snick snick snicksnick* – and the back three Edur toppled.

He landed again, just short of the opposite timber wall this time, head ducking and shoulder seeming to barely brush the ground before he tumbled right over, touched one foot on a horizontal log and used it to twist round

before landing balanced on the other foot now drawn tight beneath him. Facing the seven corpses he had just felled.

And facing two Malazan marines who, for once and just this once, had precisely nothing to say.

The marines of the 3rd and 4th Companies gathered in front of the tavern, stood or sat on the bloodstained cobbles of the main street. Wounds were tended to here and there, while others repaired armour or filed the nicks from sword edges.

Fiddler sat on the edge of a water trough near the hitching post to one side of the tavern entrance, taking stock.

Since the coast, the three other squads of 4th Company had taken losses. Gone from Gesler's squad were Sands and Uru Hela. From Hellian's, Lutes and Tavos Pond, both of whom had died in this cursed village, while from Urb's both Hanno and now Bowl were dead, and Saltlick had lost his left hand. Fiddler's own squad had, thus far, come through unscathed, and that made him feel guilty. *Like one of Hood's minions, one in the row just the other side of the gate. Crow feathers in hand, or wilted roses, or sweetcakes, or any of the countless other gifts the dead were eager to hand their newly arrived kin – gods below, Smiles is turning me into another Kanese with all these absurd beliefs. Ain't nobody waiting other side of Hood's Gate, unless it's to jeer.*

The two sergeants from the 3rd came over. Badan Gruk, whom Fiddler had met earlier, and the Quon, Primly. They made an odd pair, but that was always the way, wasn't it?

Primly gave Fiddler a strangely deferential nod. 'We're fine with this,' he said.

'With what?'

'Your seniority, Fiddler. So, what do we do now?'

Grimacing, Fiddler looked away. 'Any losses?'

'From this scrap? No. Those Edur pulled out fast as hares in a kennel. A lot shakier than we'd expected.'

'They don't like the shield to shield fighting,' Fiddler said, scratching at his filthy beard. 'They'll do it, aye, especially when they've got Letherii troops with them. But of late they dropped that tactic, since with our munitions we made it a costly one. No, they've been hunting us, ambushing us, driving us hard. Their traditional way of fighting, I'd guess.'

Primly grunted. 'Driving you, you said. So, likely there's a damned army waiting for us this side of Letheras. The anvil.'

'Aye, which is why I think we should wait here a bit. It's risky, I know, since the Edur might return and next time there might be a thousand of them.'

Badan Gruk's thinned eyes grew yet thinner. 'Hoping your Fist is going to catch up with a lot more marines.'

'Your Fist now, too, Badan Gruk.'

A sharp nod, then a scowl. 'We only got thrown into the mix because of the 4th's losses at Y'Ghatan.'

'The Adjunct keeps making changes,' Primly said. 'We don't have Fists in charge of nothing but marines – not since Crust's day—'

'Well, we do now. We're not in the Malazan Army any more, Primly.'

'Yes, Fiddler, I'm aware of that.'

'That's my suggestion,' Fiddler repeated. 'Wait here for a while. Let our mages get some rest. And hope Keneb shows and hope he's got more than a few dozen marines with him. Now, I'm not much for this seniority thing. I'd rather we sergeants just agreed on matters, so I'm not holding you to anything.'

'Gesler agrees with you, Fiddler?'

'Aye.'

'What of Hellian and Urb?'

Fiddler laughed. 'Tavern's still wet, Primly.'

The sun had gone down, but no-one seemed eager to go anywhere. Traffic in and out of the tavern occurred whenever another cask needed bringing out. The tavern's main room was a slaughterhouse no-one was inclined to stay in for very long.

Smiles walked over to where Koryk sat. 'His name's Skulldeath, if you can believe that.'

'Who?'

'Nice try. You know who. The one who could kill you with his big toe.'

'Been thinking about that attack,' Koryk said. 'Only works if they're not expecting it.'

Smiles snorted.

'No, really. I see someone flying at me I cut him in half. It's not like he can retreat or change his mind, is it?'

'You're an idiot,' she said, then nudged him. 'Hey, met your twin brother, too. His name is Vastly Blank and between you two I'd say he got all the brains.'

Koryk glowered at her. 'What is it you want with me, Smiles?'

She shrugged. 'Skulldeath. I'm going to make him mine.'

'Yours?'

'Yes. Did you know he's saving himself for a woman of royal blood?'

'That's not what the men inclined that way are saying.'

'Where'd you hear that?'

'Besides, you're hardly royal blood, Smiles. Queen of shell-shuckers won't cut it.'

'That's why I need you to lie for me. I was a Kanese princess – sent into the Malazan Army to keep the Claw from finding me—'

'Oh, for Hood's sake!'

'Shh! Listen, the rest in the squad said they'd be happy to lie for me. What's wrong with you?'

'Happy . . . ha, that's good. Very good.' He then turned to study her. 'You're eager for Skulldeath to take one of those flying leaps straight between your legs? You want to get pregnant with some prince from some Seven Cities flying squirrel tribe?'

'Pregnant? Aye, when dolphins walk and fish nest in trees. I won't get pregnant,' she pronounced. 'Bottle's giving me some herbs to take care of that. My beloved Skulldeath can empty gallons of his seed into me for Hood-damned ever and there won't be any little jackrabbits jumping round.'

'He's got the face of a girl,' Koryk said. 'And the men say he kisses like one, too.'

'Who's telling you all this?'

'Saving his seed, that's a laugh.'

'Listen, those men, they don't mean nothing. Now, am I a Kanese princess or not?'

'Oh, aye. Rival to the empire's throne, in fact. Be the flying fish to the flying squirrel and make your nest in some tree, Smiles. When all's done what's needed doing.'

She surprised him with a bright smile. 'Thanks, Koryk. You're a true friend.'

He stared after her as she hurried off. Poor lass. *The squirrel's saving his seed because he doesn't know what to do with it, is my guess.*

A figure walked past in the gloom and Koryk squinted until he recognized the man's gait. 'Hey, Bottle.'

The young mage halted, looked over, then, feet dragging, approached.

Koryk said, 'You're supposed to be asleep.'

'Thanks.'

'So you're giving Smiles special herbs, are you. Why do you—'

'I'm what?'

'Herbs. So she won't get pregnant.'

'Look, if she doesn't want to get pregnant, she should just stop straddling every—'

'Hold on, Bottle! Wait. I thought she'd talked to you. About herbs which you promised to give her—'

'Oh, those herbs. No, you got it all wrong, Koryk. Those aren't to keep her from getting pregnant. In fact, it's some concoction of my grandmother's and I've no idea if it even works, but anyway, it's got nothing to do with not getting pregnant. Why, if she'd asked me about that kind of stuff, sure, there's some very reliable—'

'Stop! What – what does this concoction you're giving her do to her, then?'

'She'd better not be taking it! It's for a man—'

'For Skulldeath?'

'Skulldeath? What . . .' Bottle stared down for a long moment. 'Do you know what skulldeath is, Koryk? It's a plant that grows on Malaz Island and maybe Geni, too. You see, normally there's male plants and there's female plants and that's how you get fruit and the like, right? Anyway, not so with the sweet little skulldeath. There's only males – no females at all. Skulldeaths loose their – well, they spill it all out into the air, and it ends up somehow getting into the seeds of other plants and just riding along, hiding, until that seed sprouts, then it takes over and suddenly, another nice skulldeath with that grey flower that's not really a flower at all, just a thin sack filled with—'

'So, that concoction Smiles asked for – what does it do?'

'Supposed to change a man who prefers other men into one who prefers women. Does it work? I have no idea.'

'Skulldeath may be a plant,' Koryk said, 'but it's also the name for a soldier in Primly's squad. A pretty one.'

'Oh, and that name . . .'

'Is obviously very appropriate, Bottle.'

'Oh. Poor Smiles.'

The Factor's house might have looked nice, but it might as well have been made of straw, the way it fell down. Astonishing that no-one had died beneath all that wreckage. Urb at the least was certainly relieved by that, though his mood wilted somewhat after Hellian was through yelling at him.

In any case, thereafter satisfied and pleasantly feeling . . . pleasant, Hellian was anything but pleased when Balgrid's appallingly unattractive face loomed into view directly in front of her. She blinked at him. 'You're shorter than I'd thought.'

'Sergeant, I'm kneeling. What are you doing under the bar?'

'I'm not the one who keeps movin' it, Baldy.'

'The other sergeants have agreed that we're staying here for a while. You with them on that, Sergeant?'

'Why not?'

'Good. Oh, did you know, in the new squads, there's another Kartoolii.'

'Probably a spy – they're still after me, y'know.'

'Why would they be after you?'

'Cause I did something, that's why. Can't 'member 'xactly what, but it was bad 'nough to get me sent here, wasn't it? A damned spy!'

'I doubt he's anything—'

'Yeah? Fine, make him come 'ere and kiss my feet, then! Tell 'im I'm the Queen of Kartool! An' I want my kissed feet! My feeted kiss, I mean. Go on, damn you!'

Less than six paces away, tucked beneath the bar at the other end, sat Skulldeath. Hiding from that pretty but way too lustful woman in Fiddler's squad. And at Hellian's words his head snapped round and his dark, almond-shaped eyes, which had already broken so many hearts, slowly widened on the dishevelled sergeant crouched in a pool of spilled wine.

Queen of Kartool.

On such modest things, worlds changed.

The women were singing an ancient song in a language that was anything but Imass. Filled with strange clicks and phlegmatic stops, along with rhythmic gestures of the hands, and the extraordinary twin voices emerging from each throat, the song made the hair on the back of Hedge's neck stand on end. *'Eres'al,'* Quick Ben had whispered, looking a little ashen himself. *'The First Language.'*

No wonder it made the skin crawl, awakening faint echoes in the back of his skull – as if stirring to life the soft murmurings of his mother a handful of days after he'd been born, even as he clung by the mouth to her tit and stared stupidly up at the blur of her face. A song to make a grown man feel horribly vulnerable, weak in the limbs and desperate for comfort.

Muttering under his breath, Hedge plucked at Quick Ben's sleeve.

The wizard understood well enough and they both rose, then backed away from the hearth and all the gathered Imass. Out into the darkness beneath a spray of glittering stars, up into the sprawl of tumbled boulders away from the rock shelters of the cliff face.

Hedge found a flat stone the size of a skiff, lying at the base of a scree. He sat down on it. Quick Ben stood nearby, bending down to collect a handful of gravel, then pacing as he began examining his collection – more by feel than sight – flinging rejections off into the gloom to bounce and skitter. 'So, Hedge.'

'What?'

'How's Fiddler these days?'

'It's not like I'm squatting on his shoulder or anything.'

'Hedge.'

'All right, I catch things occasionally. Whiffs. Echoes. He's still alive, I can say that much.'

Quick Ben paused. 'Any idea what the Adjunct's up to?'

'Who? No, why should I – never met her. You're the one should be doing the guessing, wizard. She shackled you into being her High Mage, after all. Me, I've been wandering for what seems for ever, in nothing but the ashes of the dead. At least until we found this place, and it ain't nearly as far away from the underworld as you might think.'

'Don't tell me what I think, sapper. I already know what I think and it's not what you think.'

'Well now, you're sounding all nervous again, Quick. Little heart going pitterpat?'

'She was taking them to Lether – to the Tiste Edur empire – once she managed to extricate them from Malaz harbour. Now, Cotillion says she managed that, despite my disappearing at the worst possible moment. True, some nasty losses. Like Kalam. And T'amber. Me. So, Lether. Pitching her measly army against an empire spanning half a continent or damn near, and why? Well, maybe to deliver some vengeance on behalf of the Malazan Empire and every other kingdom or people who got cut up by those roving fleets. But maybe that's not it at all, because, let's face it, as a motive it sounds, well, insane. And I don't think the Adjunct is insane. So, what's left?'

'Sorry, was that actually a question? For me?'

'Of course not, Hedge. It was rhetorical.'

'That's a relief. Go on, then.'

'Seems more likely she's set herself against the Crippled God.'

'Oh yeah? What's this Lether Empire got to do with the Crippled God?'

'A whole lot, that's what.'

'Meaning me and Fiddler are back fighting the same damned war.'

'As if you didn't already know that, Hedge – and no, wipe that innocent look off your face. It's not dark enough and you know that so that look is for me and it's a damned lie so get rid of it.'

'Ouch, the wizard's nerves are singing!'

'This is why I liked you least of all, Hedge.'

'I remember once you being scared witless of a recruit named Sorry, because she was possessed by a god. And now here you are, working for that god. Amazing, how things can turn right round in ways you'd never expect nor even predict.'

The wizard stared long and hard at the sapper. Then he said, 'Now hold on, Hedge.'

'You really think Sorry was there to get at the Empress, Quick? Some sordid plan for vengeance against Laseen? Why, that would be . . . insane.'

'What are you getting at?'

'Just wondering if you should be as sure of the ones you're working for as you think you are. Because, and it only seems this way to me, all this confusion you're feeling about the Adjunct might just be coming from some wrong-footed, uh, misapprehensions about the two gods crouching in your shadow.'

'Is all this just another one of your feelings?'

'I ain't Fiddler.'

'No, but you've been so close to him – in his damned shadow – you're picking up all his uncanny, whispered suspicions, and don't even try to deny it, Hedge. So now I better hear it straight from you. You and me, are we fighting on the same side, or not?'

Hedge grinned up at him. 'Maybe not. But, just maybe, more than you know, wizard.'

Quick Ben had selected out a half-dozen water-worn pebbles. Now he flung the rest away. 'That answer was supposed to make me feel better?'

'How do you think I feel?' Hedge demanded. 'Been at your damned side, Quick, since Raraku! And I still don't know who or even *what* you are!'

'What's your point?'

'It's this. I'm beginning to suspect that even Cotillion – and Shadowthrone – don't know you half as well as they might think. Which is why they're now keeping you close. And which is why, too, they maybe made sure you ended up without Kalam right there guarding your back.'

'If you're right – about Kalam – there's going to be trouble.'

Hedge shrugged. 'All I'm saying is, maybe the plan was for Sorry to be right there, right now, beside Fiddler.'

'The Adjunct didn't even have an army then, Hedge. What you're suggesting is impossible.'

'Depends on how much Kellanved and Dancer saw – and came to understand – when they left their empire and went in search of ascendancy.' The sapper paused, then said, 'They walked the paths of the Azath, didn't they?'

'Almost no-one knows that, Hedge. You sure didn't . . . before you died. Which brings us back to the path you ended up walking, after you'd gone and blown yourself up in Black Coral.'

'You mean, after I did my own ascending?'

'Yes.'

'I already told you most of it. The Bridgeburners ascended. Blame some Spiritwalker.'

'And now there's more of you damned fools wandering around. Hood take you all, Hedge, there were some real nasty people in the Bridgeburners. Brutal and vicious and outright evil—'

'Rubbish. And I'll tell you a secret and maybe one day it'll do you good, too. Dying humbles ya.'

'I don't need any humbling, Hedge, which is fine since I don't plan on dying any time soon.'

'Best stay light on your toes, then.'

'You guarding my back, Hedge?'

'I ain't no Kalam, but aye, I am.'

'For now.'

'For now.'

'That will have to do, I suppose—'

'Mind you, only if you're guarding mine, Quick.'

'Of course. Loyalty to the old squad and all that.'

'So what are damned pebbles for? As if I couldn't guess.'

'We're heading into an ugly scrap, Hedge.' He rounded on the sapper. 'And listen, about those damned cussers – if you blow me into tiny pieces I *will* come back for you, Hedge. That's a vow, sworn by every damned soul in me.'

'Now that raises a question, don't it? Just how long do all of those souls plan on hiding in there, Ben Adaephon Delat?'

The wizard eyed him, and, predictably, said nothing.

Trull Sengar stood at the very edge of the fire's light, beyond the gathered Imass. The women's song had sunk into a series of sounds that a mother might make to her babe, soft sounds of comfort, and Onrack had explained how this Eres'al song was in fact a kind of traverse, back into the roots of language, beginning with the bizarre yet clearly complex adult Eres language with its odd clicks and stops and all the gestures that provided punctuation, then working backward and growing ever more simplified

even as it became more musical. The effect was eerie and strangely disturbing to the Tiste Edur.

Music and song among his people was a static thing, fixated within ritual. If the ancient tales were true, there had once been a plethora of instruments in use among the Tiste Edur, but most of these were now unknown, beyond the names given them. Voice now stood in their stead and Trull began to sense that, perhaps, something had been lost.

The gestures among the women had transformed into dance, sinuous and swaying and now, suddenly, sexual.

A low voice beside him said, 'Before the child, there is passion.'

Trull glanced over and was surprised to see one of the T'lan, the clan chief, Hostille Rator.

An array of calcified bones were knotted in the filthy long hair dangling from the warrior's mottled, scarred pate. His brow ridge dominated the entire face, burying the eyes in darkness. Even clothed in the flesh of life, Hostille Rator seemed deathly.

'Passion begets the child, Tiste Edur. Do you see?'

Trull nodded. 'Yes. I think so.'

'So it was, long ago, at the Ritual.'

*Ah.*

'The child, alas,' the clan chief continued, 'grows up. And what was once passion is now . . .'

*Nothing*.

Hostille Rator resumed. 'There was a Bonecaster here, among these clans. She saw, clearly, the illusion of this realm. And saw, too, that it was dying. She sought to halt the bleeding away, by sacrificing herself. But she is failing – her spirit and her will, they are failing.'

Trull frowned at Hostille Rator. 'How did you come to know of this place?'

'She gave voice to her pain, her anguish.' The T'lan was silent a moment, then he added, 'It was our intention to answer the call of the Gathering – but the need in her voice was undeniable. We could not turn aside, even when what we surrendered was – possibly – our final rest.'

'So now you are here, Hostille Rator. Onrack believes you would usurp Ulshun Pral, but for Rud Elalle's presence – the threat he poses you.'

A glitter from the darkness beneath those brow ridges. 'You do not even whisper these things, Edur. Would you see weapons drawn this night, even after the gift of the First Song?'

'No. Yet, perhaps, better now than later.'

Trull now saw that the two T'lan Bonecasters had moved up behind Hostille Rator. The singing from the women had ceased – had it been an abrupt end? Trull could not recall. In any case, it was clear that all those present were now listening to this conversation. He saw Onrack emerge from the crowd, saw his friend's stone sword gripped in both hands.

Trull addressed Hostille Rator once more, his tone even and calm. 'You three have stood witness to all that you once were—'

'It will not survive,' the clan chief cut in. 'How can we embrace this illusion when, upon its fading, we must return to what we truly are?'

From the crowd Rud Elalle spoke, 'No harm shall befall my people – not by your hand, Hostille Rator, nor that of your Bonecasters. Nor,' he added, 'that of those who are coming here. I intend to lead the clans away – to safety.'

'There is no safety,' Hostille Rator said. 'This realm dies, and so too will all that is within it. And there can be no escape. Rud Elalle, without this realm, your clans do not even exist.'

Onrack said, 'I am T'lan, like you. Feel the flesh that now clothes you. The muscle, the heat of blood. Feel the breath in your lungs, Hostille Rator. I have looked into your eyes – each of you three – and I see what no doubt resides in mine. The wonder. The *remembering*.'

'We cannot permit it,' said the Bonecaster named Til'aras Benok. 'For when we leave this place, Onrack . . .'

'Yes,' Trull's friend whispered. 'It will be . . . too much. To bear.'

'There was passion once,' Hostille Rator said. 'For us. It can never return. We are children no longer.'

'None of you understand!'

Rud Elalle's sudden shriek startled everyone, and Trull saw Ulshun Pral – on his face an expression of distress – reach out a hand to his adopted son, who angrily brushed it away as he stepped forward, the fire in his eyes as fierce as that in the hearth beyond. 'Stone, earth, trees and grasses. Beasts. The sky and the stars! None of this is an illusion!'

'A trapped memory—'

'No, Bonecaster, you are wrong.' He struggled to hold back his anger, and spun to face Onrack. 'I see your heart, Onrack the Broken. I know, you will stand with me – in the time that comes. You will!'

'Yes, Rud Elalle.'

'Then you believe!'

Onrack was silent.

Hostille Rator's laugh was a soft, bitter rasp. 'It is this, Rud Elalle. Onrack of the Logros T'lan Imass chooses to fight at your side, chooses to fight for these Bentract, because he cannot abide the thought of returning to what he once was, and so he would rather die here. And death is what Onrack the Broken anticipates – indeed, what he now yearns for.'

Trull studied his friend, and saw on Onrack's firelit face the veracity of Hostille Rator's words.

The Tiste Edur did not hesitate. 'Onrack will not stand alone,' he said.

Til'aras Benok faced Trull. 'You surrender your life, Edur, to defend an illusion?'

'That, Bonecaster, is what we mortals delight in doing. You bind yourself to a clan, to a tribe, to a nation or an empire, but to give force to the illusion of a common bond, you must feed its opposite – that all those not of your clan, or tribe, or empire, do not share that bond. I have seen Onrack the Broken, a T'lan Imass. And now I have seen him, mortal once again. To the joy and the life in the eyes of my friend, I will fight all those who deem him their enemy. For the bond between us is one of friendship, and that, Til'aras Benok, is *not* an illusion.'

Hostille Rator asked Onrack, 'In your mercy, as you have now found it alive once more in your soul, will you now reject Trull Sengar of the Tiste Edur?'

And the warrior bowed his head and said, 'I cannot.'

'Then, Onrack the Broken, your soul shall never find peace.'

'I know.'

Trull felt as if he had been punched in the chest. It was all very well to make his bold claims, in ferocious sincerity that could only come of true friendship. It was yet another thing to discover the price it demanded in the soul of the one he called friend. 'Onrack,' he whispered in sudden anguish.

But this moment would not await all that might have been said, all that needed to be said, for Hostille Rator had turned to face his Bonecasters, and whatever silent communication passed among these three was quick, decisive, for the clan chief swung round and walked towards Ulshun Pral. Whereupon he fell to one knee and bowed his head. 'We are humbled, Ulshun Pral. We are shamed by these two strangers. You are the Bentract. As were we, once, long ago. We now choose to remember. We now choose to fight in your name. In our deaths there will be naught but honour, this we vow.' He then rose and faced Rud Elalle. 'Soletaken, will you accept us as your soldiers?'

'As soldiers? No. As friends, as Bentract, yes.'

The three T'lan bowed to him.

All of this passed in a blur before Trull Sengar's eyes. Since Onrack the Broken's admission, it seemed as if Trull's entire world had, with grinding, stone-crushing irresistibility, turned on some vast, unimagined axis – yet he was drawn round again by a hand on his shoulder, and Onrack, now standing before him.

'There is no need,' the Imass warrior said. 'I know something even Rud Elalle does not, and I tell you this, Trull Sengar, there is no need. Not for grief. Nor regret. My friend, listen to me. *This world will not die*.'

And Trull found no will within him to challenge that assertion, to drive doubt into his friend's earnest gaze. After a moment, then, he simply sighed and nodded. 'So be it, Onrack.'

'And, if we are careful,' Onrack continued, 'neither shall we.'

'As you say, friend.'

Thirty paces away in the darkness, Hedge turned to Quick Ben and hissed, 'What do you make of all that, wizard?'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'Seems the confrontation has been averted, if Hostille Rator's kneeling before Ulshun Pral didn't involve picking up a dropped fang or something.'

'A dropped – what?'

'Never mind. That's not the point at all, anyway. But I now know I am right in one thing and don't ask me how I know. I just do. Suspicion into certainty.'

'Well, go on, damn you.'

'Just this, Hedge. The Finnest. Of Scabandari Bloodeye. It's here.'

'Here? What do you mean, here?'

'*Here*, sapper. *Right here*.'

The gate was a shattered mess on one side. The huge cyclopean stones that had once formed an enormous arch easily five storeys high had the appearance of having been blasted apart by multiple impacts, flinging some

of the shaped blocks a hundred paces or more from the entranceway. The platform the arch had once spanned was heaved and buckled as if some earthquake had rippled through the solid bedrock beneath the pavestones. The other side was dominated by a tower of still standing blocks, corkscrew-twisted and seemingly precariously balanced.

The illusion of bright daylight had held during this last part of the journey, as much by the belligerent insistence of Udinaas as by the amused indulgence of Clip. Or, perhaps, Silchas Ruin's impatience. The foremost consequence of this was that Seren Pedac was exhausted – and Udinaas looked no better. Like the two Tiste Andii, however, Kettle seemed impervious – with all the boundless energy of a child, Seren supposed, raising the possibility that at some moment not too far off she would simply collapse.

Seren could see that Fear Sengar was weary as well, but probably that had more to do with the unpleasant burden settling ever more heavily upon his shoulders. She had been harsh and unforgiving of herself in relating to the Tiste Edur the terrible crime she had committed upon Udinaas, and she had done so in the hope that Fear Sengar would – with a look of unfeigned and most deserving disgust in his eyes – choose to reject her, and his own vow to guard her life.

But the fool had instead held to that vow, although she could see the brutal awakening of regret. He would not – could not – break his word.

It was getting easier to disdain these bold gestures, the severity so readily embraced by males of any species. Some primitive holdover, she reasoned, of the time when possessing a woman meant survival, not of anything so prosaic as one's own bloodline, but *possession* in the manner of ownership, and survival in the sense of power. There had been backward tribes all along the fringe territories of the Letherii kingdom where such archaic notions were practised, and not always situations where men were the owners and wielders of power – for sometimes it was the women. In either case, history had shown that such systems could only survive in isolation, and only among peoples for whom magic had stagnated into a chaotic web of proscriptions, taboos and the artifice of nonsensical rules – where the

power offered by sorcery had been usurped by profane ambitions and the imperatives of social control.

Contrary to Hull Beddict's romantic notions of such people, Seren Pedac had come to feel little remorse when she thought about their inevitable and often bloody extinction.

Control was ever an illusion, and its maintenance could only persist when in isolation. Not to say, of course, that the Letherii system was one of unfettered freedom and the liberty of individual will. Hardly. One imposition had been replaced by another. *But at the very least it's not one divided by gender.*

The Tiste Edur were different. Their notions . . . primitive. Offer a sword, bury it at the threshold of one's home, the symbolic exchange of vows so archaic no words were even necessary. In such a ritual, no negotiation was possible, and if marriage did not involve negotiation then it was not marriage. *No, just mutual ownership. Or not-somutual ownership.* Such a thing deserved little respect.

And now, here, it was not even a prospective husband laying claim to her life, but that prospective husband's damned brother. And, to make the entire situation yet more absurd, the prospective husband was dead. *Fear will defend to the death my right to marry a corpse. Or, rather, the corpse's right to claim me. Well, that is madness and I will not – I do not – accept it. Not for a moment.*

*Yes, I have moved past self-pity. Now I'm just angry.*

*Because he refused to let his disgust dissuade him.*

For all her notions of defiance, that last thought stung her.

Udinaas had moved past her to study the ruined gate, and now he turned to Clip. 'Well, does it yet live?'

The Tiste Andii's chain and rings were spinning from one finger again, and he offered the Letherii slave a cool smile. 'The last road to walk,' he said, 'lies on the other side of the gate.'

'So who got mad and kicked it to pieces, Clip?'

'Of no consequence any more,' Clip replied, his smile broadening.

'You have no idea, in other words,' Udinaas said. 'Well, if we're to go through it, let's stop wasting time. I've almost given up hoping that you'll end up garrotting yourself with that chain. Almost.'

His last comment seemed to startle Clip for some reason.

And all at once Seren Pedac saw that chain with its rings differently. *By the Errant! Why did I not see it before? It is a garrotte. Clip is a damned assassin!* She snorted. 'And you claim to be a Mortal Sword! You're nothing but a murderer, Clip. Yes, Udinaas saw that long ago – which is why you hate him so. He was never fooled by all those weapons you carry. And now, neither am I.'

'We're wasting time indeed,' Clip said, once more seemingly unperturbed, and he turned and approached the huge gate. Silchas Ruin set out after him, and Seren saw that the White Crow had his hands on the grips of his swords.

'Danger ahead,' Fear Sengar announced and yes, damn him, he then moved from his position just behind Seren's right shoulder to directly in front of her. And drew his sword.

Udinaas witnessed all this and grunted dismissively, then half turned and said, 'Silchas Ruin's earned his paranoia, Fear. But even that doesn't mean we're about to jump into a pit of dragons.' He then smiled without any humour. 'Not that dragons live in pits.'

When he walked after the two Tiste Andii, Kettle ran up to take his hand. At first Udinaas reacted as if her touch had burned him, but then his resistance vanished.

Clip reached the threshold, stepped forward and disappeared. A moment later Silchas Ruin did the same.

Neither Udinaas nor Kettle hesitated.

Reaching the same point, Fear Sengar paused and eyed her. 'What is in your mind, Acquitor?' he asked.

'Do you think I might abandon you all, Fear? Watch you step through and, assuming you can't get back, I just turn round and walk this pointless road – one I probably would never leave? Is that choice left to me?'

'All choices are left to you, Acquitor.'

'You too, I would say. Except, of course, for the ones you willingly surrendered.'

'Yes.'

'You admit that so easily.'

'Perhaps it seems that way.'

'Fear, if anyone should turn round right now, it is you.'

'We are close, Acquitor. We are perhaps a few strides from Scabandari's Finnest. How can you imagine I would even consider such a thing?'

'Some stubborn thread of self-preservation, perhaps.

Some last surviving faith of mine that you actually possess a brain, one that can reason, that is. Fear Sengar, you will probably die. If you pass through this gate.'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps I shall, if only to confound Udinaas's expectations.'

'Udinaas?'

A faint smile. 'The hero fails the quest.'

'Ah. And that would prove satisfying enough?'

'Remains to be seen, I suppose. Now, you will follow?'

'Of course.'

'You then willingly surrender this choice?'

In answer she set a hand against his chest and pushed him, step by step, into the gate. All pressure vanished when he went through, and Seren stumbled forward, only to collide with the Tiste Edur's broad, muscled chest.

He righted her before she could fall.

And she saw, before them all, a most unexpected vista. Black volcanic ash, beneath a vast sky nearly as black, despite at least three suns blazing in the sky overhead. And, on this rough plain, stretching on all sides in horrific proliferation, there were dragons.

Humped, motionless. Scores – hundreds.

She heard Kettle's anguished whisper. '*Udinaas! They're all dead!*'

Clip, standing twenty paces ahead, was now facing them.

The chain spun tight, and then he bowed. 'Welcome, my dear companions, to Starvald Demelain.'

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The shadows lie on the field like the dead
From night's battle as the sun lifts high its standard
Into the dew-softened air

The children rise like flowers on stalks
To sing unworded songs we long ago surrendered
And the bees dance with great care

You might touch this scene with blessing
Even as you settle the weight of weapon in hand
And gaze across this expanse

And vow to the sun another day of blood

Untitled
Toc Anaster

Gaskaral Traum was the first soldier in Atri-Preda Bivatt's army to take a life that morning. A large man with faint threads of Tarthenal blood in his veins, he had pitched his tent the night before forty paces from the Tiste Edur encampment. Within it he had lit a small oil lamp and arranged his bedroll over bundles of clothing, spare boots and spare helm. Then he had lain down beside it, on the side nearest the Edur tents, and let the lamp devour the last slick of oil until the darkness within the tent matched that of outside.

With dawn's false glow ebbing, Gaskaral Traum drew a knife and slit the side of the tent beside him, then silently edged out into the wet grasses, where he laid motionless for a time.

Then, seeing at last what he had been waiting for, he rose and, staying low, made his way across the sodden ground. The rain was still thrumming down on the old seabed of Q'uson Tapi – where waited the hated Awl – and the air smelled of sour mud. Although a large man, Gaskaral could move

like a ghost. He reached the first row of Edur tents, paused with held breath for a moment, then edged into the camp.

The tent of Overseer Brohl Handar was centrally positioned, but otherwise unguarded. As Gaskaral came closer, he saw that the flap was untied, hanging loose. Water from the rain just past streamed down the oiled canvas like tears, pooling round the front pole and in the deep footprints crowding the entrance.

Gaskaral slipped his knife beneath his outer shirt and used the grimy undergarment to dry the handle and his left hand – palm and fingers – before withdrawing the weapon once more. Then he crept for that slitted opening.

Within was grainy darkness. The sound of breathing. And there, at the far end, the Overseer's cot. Brohl Handar was sleeping on his back. The furs covering him had slipped down to the floor. Of his face and chest, Gaskaral could see naught but heavy shadow.

Blackened iron gleamed, betrayed by the honed edge.

Gaskaral Traum took one more step, then he surged forward in a blur.

The figure standing directly over Brohl Handar spun, but not in time, as Gaskaral's knife sank deep, sliding between ribs, piercing the assassin's heart.

The black dagger fell and stuck point-first into the floor, and Gaskaral took the body's weight as, with a faint sigh, the killer slumped.

Atri-Preda Bivatt's favoured bodyguard – chosen by her outside Drene to safeguard the Overseer against just this eventuality – froze for a moment, eyes fixed on Brohl Handar's face, on the Edur's breathing. No stirring awake. And that was good. Very good.

Angling beneath the dead assassin's weight, Gaskaral slowly sheathed his knife, then reached down and retrieved the black dagger. This was the last of the bastards, he was sure. Seven in all, although only two before this one had got close enough to attempt Brohl's murder – and both of those had

been in the midst of battle. Letur Anict was ever a thorough man, one prone to redundancy in assuring that his desires were satisfied. Alas, not this time.

Gaskaral lowered himself yet further until he could fold the body over one shoulder, then, rising into a bent-knee stance, he padded silently back to the tent-flap. Stepping to avoid the puddle and the upright pole, he carefully angled his burden through the opening.

Beneath overcast clouds with yet another fall of rain beginning, Gaskaral Traum quickly made his way back to the Letherii side of the camp. The body could remain in his tent – the day now approaching was going to be a day of battle, which meant plenty of chaos, plenty of opportunities to dispose of the corpse.

He was somewhat concerned, however. It was never a good thing to not sleep the night before a battle. But he was ever sensitive to his instincts, as if he could smell the approach of an assassin, as if he could slip into their minds. Certainly his uncanny timing proved the talent – another handful of heartbeats back there and he would have been too late—

Occasionally, of course, instincts failed.

The two figures that suddenly rushed him from the darkness caught Gaskaral Traum entirely by surprise. A shock blessedly short-lived, as it turned out. Gaskaral threw the body he had been carrying at the assassin on his right. With no time to draw out his knife, he simply charged to meet the other killer. Knocked aside the dagger stabbing for his throat, took the man's head in both hands and twisted hard.

Hard enough to spin the assassin's feet out from under him as the neck snapped.

The other killer had been thrown down by the corpse and was just rolling back into a crouch when, upon looking up, he met Gaskaral's boot – under his chin. The impact lifted the man into the air, arms flung out to the sides, his head separated from his spine, and dead before he thumped back onto the ground.

Gaskaral Traum looked round, saw no more coming, then permitted himself a moment of self-directed anger. Of course they would have realized that someone was intercepting them. So in went one while the other two remained back to see who their unknown hunter was, and then they would deal with that hunter in the usual way.

'Yeah? Like fuck they did.'

He studied the three bodies for a moment longer. Damn, it was going to be a crowded tent.

The sun would brook no obstacle in its singular observation of the Battle of Q'uson Tapi, and as it rose it burned away the clouds and drove spears of heat into the ground until the air steamed. Brohl Handar, awakening surprisingly refreshed, stood outside his tent and watched as his Arapay Tiste Edur readied their armour and weapons. The sudden, unrelieved humidity made iron slick and the shafts of spears oily, and already the ground underfoot was treacherous – the seabed would be a nightmare, he feared.

In the evening before, he and his troop had watched the Awl preparations, and Brohl Handar well understood the advantages Redmask was seeking in secure footing, but the Overseer suspected that such efforts would fail in the end. Canvas and hide tarps would before long grow as muddy and slippery as the ground beyond. At the initial shock of contact, however, there would likely be a telling difference . . . but not enough.

*I hope.*

A Letherii soldier approached – an oversized man he'd seen before – with a pleasant smile on his innocuous, oddly gentle face. 'The sun is most welcome, Overseer, is it not? I convey the Atri-Preda's invitation to join her – be assured that you will have time to return to your warriors and lead them into battle.'

'Very well. Proceed, then.'

The various companies were moving into positions all along the edge of the seabed opposite the Awl. Brohl saw that the Bluerose lancers were now

dismounted, looking a little lost with their newly issued shields and spears. There were less than a thousand left and the Overseer saw that they had been placed as auxiliaries and would only be thrown into battle if things were going poorly. 'Now there's a miserable bunch,' he said to his escort, nodding towards the Bluerose Battalion.

'So they are, Overseer. Yet see how their horses are saddled and not too far away. This is because our scouts cannot see the Kechra in the Awl camp. The Atri-Preda expects another flanking attack from those two creatures, and this time she will see it met with mounted lancers.

Who will then pursue.'

'I wish them well – those Kechra ever remain the gravest threat and the sooner they are dead the better.'

Atri-Preda Bivatt stood in a position at the edge of the old shoreline that permitted her a view of what would be the field of battle. As was her habit, she had sent away all her messengers and aides – they hovered watchfully forty paces back – and was now alone with her thoughts, her observations, and would remain so – barring Brohl's visit – until just before the engagement commenced.

His escort halted a short distance away from the Atri-Preda and waved Brohl Handar forward with an easy smile.

*How can he be so calm? Unless he's one of those who will be standing guarding horses. Big as he is, he hasn't the look of a soldier – well, even horse-handlers are needed, after all.*

'Overseer, you look . . . well rested.'

'I appear to be just that, Atri-Preda. As if the spirits of my ancestors held close vigil on me last night.'

'Indeed. Are your Arapay ready?'

'They are. Will you begin this battle with your mages?'

'I must be honest in this matter. I cannot rely upon their staying alive throughout the engagement. Accordingly, yes, I will use them immediately.

And if they are still with me later, then all the better.'

'No sign of the Kechra, then.'

'No. Observe, the enemy arrays itself.'

'On dry purchase—'

'To begin, yes, but we will win that purchase, Overseer.

And that is the flaw in Redmask's tactic. We will strike hard enough to knock them back, and then it will be the Awl who find themselves mired in the mud.'

Brohl Handar turned to study the Letherii forces. The various brigades, companies and battalion elements had been merged on the basis of function. On the front facing the Awl, three wedges of heavy infantry. Flanks of skirmishers mixed with medium infantry and archers. Blocks of archers between the wedges, who if they moved down onto the seabed would not go very far. Their flights of arrows would be intended to perforate the Awl line so that when the heavies struck they would drive back the enemy, one step, two, five, ten and into the mud.

'I do not understand this Redmask,' Brohl said, frowning back at the Awl lines.

'He had no choice,' Bivatt replied. 'Not after Praedegar. And that was, for him, a failure of patience. Perhaps this is, as well, but as I said: no choice left. We have him, Overseer. Yet he will make this victory a painful one, given the chance.'

'Your mages may well end it before it's begun, Atri-Preda.'

'We will see.'

Overhead, the sun continued its inexorable climb, heating the day with baleful intent. On the seabed lighter patches had begun appearing as the topmost surface dried. But immediately beneath, of course, the mud would remain soft and deep enough to cause trouble.

Bivatt had two mages left – the third had died two days past, fatally weakened by the disaster at Praedegar – one lone mounted archer had succeeded in killing three mages with one damned arrow. Brohl Handar now saw those two figures hobbling like ancients out to the old shoreline's edge. One at each end of the outermost heavy infantry wedge. They would launch their terrible wave of magic at angles intended to converge a dozen or so ranks deep in the centre formation of Awl, so as to maximize the path of destruction.

The Atri-Preda evidently made some gesture that Brohl did not see, for all at once her messengers had arrived. She turned to him. 'It is time. Best return to your warriors, Overseer.'

Brohl Handar grimaced. 'Rearguard again.'

'You will see a fight this day, Overseer. I am sure of that.'

He was not convinced, but he turned away then. Two strides along and he paused and said, 'May this day announce the end of this war.'

The Atri-Preda did not reply. It was not even certain she had heard him, as she was speaking quietly to the soldier who had been his escort. He saw surprise flit across her features beneath the helm, then she nodded.

Brohl Handar glared up at the sun, and longed for the shadowed forests of home. Then he set out for his Arapay.

Sitting on a boulder, Toc Anaster watched the children play for a moment longer, then he rolled the thinned flat of hide into a scroll and slipped it into his satchel, and added the brush of softened wood and the now-resealed bowl of charcoal, marrow and gaenth-berry ink. He rose, squinted skyward for a moment, then walked over to his horse. Seven paces, and by the time he arrived his moccasins were oversized clumps of mud. He tied the satchel to the saddle, drew a knife and bent down to scrape away as much of the mud as he could.

The Awl were gathered in their ranks off to his left, standing, waiting as the Letherii forces five hundred paces away jostled into the formations they would seek to maintain in the advance. Redmask's warriors seemed

strangely silent – of course, this was not their kind of battle. 'No,' Toc muttered. 'This is the Letherii kind.' He looked across at the enemy.

Classic wedges in sawtooth, Toc observed. Three arrowheads of heavy infantry. Those formations would be rather messy by the time they reached the Awl. Moving slow, with soldiers falling, stumbling and slipping with every stride they attempted. All to the good. There would be no heaving push at the moment of contact, not without entire front ranks of heavily armoured soldiers falling flat on their faces.

'You will ride away,' Torrent said behind him. 'Or so you think. But I will be watching you, Mezla—'

'Oh, put it to rest,' Toc said. 'It's hardly my fault Redmask doesn't think you're worth much, Torrent. Besides,' he added, 'it's not as if a horse could do much more than walk in this. And finally, Redmask has said he might want me close to hand – with my arrows – in case the K'Chain Che'Malle fail.'

'They will not fail.'

'Oh, and what do you know of K'Chain Che'Malle, Torrent?'

'I know what Redmask tells us.'

'And what does he know? More to the point, *how* does he know? Have you not wondered that? Not even once? The K'Chain Che'Malle are this world's demons. Creatures of the far past. Virtually everywhere else they are extinct. So what in Hood's name are they doing here? And why are they at Redmask's side, seemingly eager to do as he bids?'

'Because he is Redmask, Mezla. He is not as we are and yes, I see how the envy burns in your eye. You will ever despise those who are better than you.'

Toc leaned his forearms across the back of his horse. 'Come closer, Torrent. Look into the eyes of this mare here. Tell me, do you see envy?'

'A mindless beast.'

'That will probably die today.'

'I do not understand you, Mezla.'

'I know. Anyway, I see that same look in your eyes, Torrent. That same blind willingness. To believe everything you need to believe. Redmask is to you as I am to this poor horse.'

'I will listen to you no longer.'

The young warrior headed off, the stiffness of his strides soon deteriorating in the conglomeration of mud on his feet.

Nearby the children were flinging clumps of the stuff at each other and laughing. *The younger ones, that is.* Those carrying a few more years were silent, staring over at the enemy forces, where horns had begun sounding, and now, two well-guarded groups edging out to the very edge of the ancient shore. The mages.

*We begin, then.*

Far to the west the sun had yet to rise. In a nondescript village a day's fast march from Letheras, where too many had died in the past two days, three Falari heavy infantry from 3rd Company sat on one edge of a horse trough outside the only tavern. Lookback, Drawfirst and Shoaly were cousins, or so the others thought of them, given their shared Falar traits of fiery red hair and blue eyes, and the olive-hued skin of the main island's indigenous people, who called themselves the Walk. The idea seemed convenient enough, although none had known the others before enlisting in the Malazan Army.

The Walk civilization had thrived long ago, before the coming of iron, in fact, and as miners of tin, copper and lead it had once dominated all the isles of the archipelago in the trade of bronze weapons and ornamentation. Had they been of pure Walk blood, the soldiers would have been squatter, black-haired and reputedly laconic to the point of somnolent; as it was, they all possessed the harder, fiercer blood of the Falari invaders who had conquered most of the islands generations past. The combination, oddly enough, made for superb marines.

At the moment, amidst darkness and a pleasantly cool breeze coming in from the river to the south, the three were having a conversation, the subjects of which were Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy. Those two names – if not their pathetic ranks – were well known to all natives of Falar.

'But they've changed,' Lookback said. 'That gold skin, it's not natural at all. I think we should kill them.'

Drawfirst, who possessed the unfortunate combination of large breasts and a tendency to perspire profusely, had taken advantage of the darkness to divest herself of her upper armour and was now mopping beneath her breasts with a cloth. Now she said, 'But what's the point of that, Look? The cult is dead. It's been dead for years.'

'Ain't dead for us, though, is it?'

'Mostly,' answered Shoaly.

'That's you all right, Shoaly,' Lookback said. 'Always seeing the dying and dead side of things.'

'So go ask 'em, Look. And they'll tell you the same. Fener cult's finished.'

'That's why I think we should kill them. For betraying the cult. For betraying us. And what's with that gold skin anyway? It's creepy.'

'Listen,' Shoaly said, 'we just partnered with these squads. In case you forgot, Lookback, this is the company that crawled out from under Y'Ghatan. And then there's Fiddler. A Hood-damned Bridgeburner and maybe the only one left. Gesler was once high-ranked and so was Stormy, but just like Whiskeyjack they got busted down and down, and down, and now here you are wanting to stick 'em. The cult got outlawed and now Fener ain't nowhere a god's supposed to be but that ain't Gesler's fault. Not Stormy's neither.'

'So what are you saying?' Lookback retorted. 'We should just leave 'em and that's that?'

'Leave 'em? Drawfirst, explain it to this fool.'

She had pushed her breasts back into their harness and was making some final adjustments. 'It's simple, Look. Not only are we stuck here, with Fid and the rest. We're all gonna die with 'em, too. Now, as for me – and probably Shoaly here – we're gonna stand and fight, right at their sides. Gesler, Stormy, those cute heavies they got. And when we finally fall, nobody's gonna be able to say we wasn't worth that standing there beside 'em. Now, maybe it's because you're the last heavy in Primly's squad. Maybe if Masker was still with you, you'd not be talking the way you're talking. So now you gotta choose, Lookback. Fight with us, fight with Reliko and Vastly Blank in Badan Gruk's squad, or fight on your own as the sole fist in Primly's. But every one of those choices is still fighting. Creep up behind Ges or Stormy and I'll lop your head off myself.'

'All right all right, I was just making conversation—'

Sounds from their left drew the heavies upright, reaching for weapons. Three figures padding down the main street towards them. Strap Mull, Skim and Neller.

Skim called out in a low voice, 'Soldiers on the way. Look sharp.'

'Letherii?' Shoaly asked.

'No,' she replied, halting opposite them while the other two marines continued on into the tavern. 'Picture in your heads the ugliest faces you ever seen, and you then kissin' them big and wet.'

'Finally,' Drawfirst sighed, 'some good news for a change.'

* * *

Beak and the captain made their way back to where Fist Keneb waited at the head of the column. There had been Tiste Edur ahead of them for some time, unwilling to engage, but now they were gone, at least between here and yon village.

The captain drew close to the Fist. 'Beak says they're marines, Fist. Seems we found some of them.'

'All of them,' Beak said. 'The ones who got far ahead of the rest. They're in the village and they've been killing Tiste Edur. Lots of Tiste Edur.'

'The munitions we heard yesterday.'

'Just so, Fist,' Beak said, nodding.

'All right, finally some good news. How many?'

'Seven, eight squads,' Beak replied. He delighted in being able to talk, in person, with a real Fist. Oh, he'd imagined scenes like this, of course, with Beak there providing all kinds of information to make the Fist do all the heroic things that needed doing, and then at last Beak himself being the biggest hero of all. He was sure everyone had dreams like that, the sudden revealing of some hidden, shy side that no-one else knew anything about and couldn't ever have guessed was even there. Shy, until it was needed, and then out it came, amazing everyone!

'Beak?'

'Fist?'

'I was asking, do they know we're here?'

'Yes sir, I think so. They've got some interesting mages, including an old style warlock from the Jakata people who were the first people on Malaz Island after the Stormriders retreated. He can see through the eyes of all sorts of creatures and that must have been helpful since the coast. There's also a Dal Honese bush shaman and a Dal Honese Grass Dancer. And a Nathii swamp necromancer.'

'Beak,' said Keneb, 'do these squads include Fiddler? Gesler and Stormy?'

'Fiddler's the one with the fiddle who played so sadly in Malaz City? The one with the Deck games in his head? Yes sir, he's there. Gesler and Stormy, they're the Falari ones, but with skins of gold and muscles and all that, the ones who were reforged in the fires of Tellann. Telas, Kurald Liosan, the fires, the ones dragons fly through to gain immunities and other proofs against magic and worse. Yes, they're there, too.'

See how they stared at him in wonder! Oh, just like the dream!

And he knew, all too well, how all this was going to turn out and even that couldn't make him anything but proud. He squinted up at the darkness overhead. 'It'll be dawn in a bell or so.'

Keneb turned to Faradan Sort. 'Captain, take Beak with you and head into the village. I'd like to see these squads presented – barring whatever pickets they've set out.'

'Yes, Fist. Plan on dressing 'em down, sir?'

Keneb's brows lifted. 'Not at all, Faradan. No. I might end up kissing every damned one of them, though.'

So once more Beak walked alongside Captain Faradan Sort, and that felt good and proper now, as if he'd always belonged with her, always being useful when that was what she needed. False dawn was just beginning and the air smelled wonderfully fresh – at least until they came to the pits where the Edur bodies had been dumped. That didn't smell good at all.

'Gods below,' the captain muttered as they skirted one of the shallow pits.

Beak nodded. 'Moranth munitions do that. Just . . . parts of people, and everything chewed up.'

'Not in this pit,' she said, pointing as they passed another mass grave. 'These ones were cut down. Swords, quarrels . . .'

'Aye, Captain, we're good at that, too, aren't we? But that's not why the Edur left – there was almost a thousand of them gathered here, planning on one more push. But then orders came to withdraw and so they did. They're now a league behind us, joining up with still more Edur.'

'The hammer,' Faradan Sort said, 'and somewhere ahead, the anvil.'

He nodded again.

She paused to search his face in the gloom. 'And the Adjunct and the fleet? Beak?'

'Don't know, sir. If you're wondering if they'll get to us in time to relieve us, then no. Not a chance. We're going to have to hold out, Captain, for so

long it's impossible.'

She scowled at that. 'And if we just squat here? Right in this village?'

'They'll start pushing. There'll be four or five thousand Edur by then. That many can push us, sir, whether we want them to or not. Besides, didn't the Fist say he wanted to engage and hold down as many of the enemy as possible? To keep them from going anywhere else, like back behind the city walls which would mean the Adjunct's got to deal with another siege and nobody wants that.'

She glared at him for a moment longer, then set out again. Beak fell in step behind her.

From just behind a black heap of tailings at the edge of the village a voice called out, 'Nice seeing you again, Captain.'

Faradan Sort went on.

Beak saw Corporal Tarr rise from behind the tailings, slinging his crossbow back over a shoulder then dusting himself off before approaching on an intercept course.

'Fist wants to knock before coming in, does he?'

The captain halted in front of the stolid corporal. 'We've been fast-marching for a while now,' she said. 'We're damned tired, but if we're going to march into this village, we're not going to drag our boots. So the Fist called a short halt. That's all.'

Tarr scratched at his beard, making the various depending bones and such rustle and click. 'Fair enough,' he said.

'I am so relieved that you approve, Corporal. Now, the Fist wants the squads here all out in the main street.'

'We can do that,' Tarr replied, grinning. 'Been fighting for a while now and we're damned tired, Captain. So the sergeants got most of us resting up in the, uh, the tavern. But when the Fist sees us, well, we'll be looking smart as can be, I'm sure.'

'Get your arse into that tavern, Corporal, and wake the bastards up. We'll wait right here – but not for long, understood?'

A quick, unobtrusive salute and Tarr headed off.

'See what happens when an officer's not around enough? They get damned full of themselves, that's what happens, Beak.'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, when they hear all the bad news they won't be anywhere near as arrogant.'

'Oh, they know, sir. Better than we do.' *But that's not completely true. They don't know what I know, and neither, Captain my love, do you.*

They both turned at the sound of the column, coming up fast. Faster than it should be, in fact.

The captain's comment was succinct. 'Shit.' Then she added, 'Go on ahead, Beak – get 'em ready to move!'

'Yes sir!'

The problem with owls was that, even as far as birds went, they were profoundly stupid. Getting them to even so much as turn their damned heads was a struggle, no matter how tightly Bottle gripped their tiny squirming souls.

He was locked in such a battle at the moment, so far past the notion of sleep that it seemed it belonged exclusively to other people and would for ever remain beyond his reach.

But all at once it did not matter where the owl was looking, nor even where it *wanted* to look. Because there were figures moving across the land, through the copses, the tilled grounds, swarming the slopes of the old quarry pits and on the road and all its converging tracks. Hundreds, thousands. Moving quiet, weapons readied. And less than half a league behind Keneb's column.

Bottle shook himself, eyes blinking rapidly as he refocused – the pitted wall of the tavern, plaster chipped where daggers had been thrown against it, the yellow runnels of leakage from the thatched roof above the common room. Around him, marines pulling on their gear. Someone, probably Hellian, spitting and gagging somewhere behind the bar.

One of the newly arrived marines appeared in front of him, pulling up a chair and sitting down. The Dal Honese mage, the one with the jungle still in his eyes.

'Nep Furrow,' he now growled. 'Mimber me?'

'Mimber what?'

'Me!'

'Yes. Nep Furrow. Like you just said. Listen, I've got no time to talk—'

A fluttering wave of one gnarled hand. 'We'en know! Bit the Edur! We'en know all'at.' A bent finger stabbed at Bottle. 'Issn this. You. Used dup! An'thas be-ad! Be-ad! We all die! Cuzzin you!'

'Oh, thanks for that, you chewed-up root! We weren't taking the scenic leg like you bastards, you know. In fact, we only got this far because of me!'

'Vlah! Iss th'feedle! The feedle orn your sergeant! Issn the song, yeseen – it ain't done-done yeet. Ain't yeet donedone! Hah!'

Bottle stared at the mage. 'So this is what happens when you pick your nose but never put anything back, right?'

'Pick'n back! Hee hee! Een so, Bauble, yeen the cause alla us dyin, s'long as yeen know.'

'And what about the unfinished song?'

An elaborate shrug. 'Oonoes when, eh? Oonoes?'

Then Fiddler was at the table. 'Bottle, now's not the time for a Hood-damned conversation. Out into the street and look awake, damn you – we're all about to charge out of this village like a herd of bhederin.'

*Yeah, and right over a cliff we go.* 'Wasn't me started this conversation, Sergeant—'

'Grab your gear, soldier.'

Koryk stood with the others of the squad, barring Bottle who clearly thought he was unique or something, and watched as the leading elements of the column appeared at the end of the main street, a darker mass amidst night's last, stubborn grip. No-one on horses, he saw, which wasn't too surprising. Food for Keneb and his tail-end company must have been hard to find, so horses went into the stew – there, a few left, but loaded down with gear. Soon there'd be stringy, lean meat to add flavour to the local grain that tasted the way goat shit smelled.

He could feel his heart thumping strong in his chest. Oh, there would be fighting today. The Edur to the west were rolling them up all right. And ahead, on this side of the great capital city, there'd be an army or two. *Waiting just for us and isn't that nice of 'em.*

Fiddler loomed directly in front of Koryk and slapped the half-blood on the side of his helm. 'Wake up, damn you!'

'I *was* awake, Sergeant!'

But that was all right. Understandable, even, as Fiddler went down the line snapping at everyone. Aye, there'd been way too much drinking in this village and wits were anything but sharp. Of course, Koryk felt fine enough. He'd mostly slept when the others were draining the last casks of ale. Slept, aye, knowing what was coming.

The new marines from 3rd Company had provided some novelty but not for long. They'd taken the easy route and they knew it and now so did everyone else, and it gave them all a look in the eyes, one that said they still had something to prove and this little help-out here in this village hadn't been nearly enough. *Gonna have to dive across a few hundred more Edur, sweetie, before any of us but Smiles gives you a nod or two.*

At the head of the column, which had now arrived, there was Fist Keneb and the sergeant, Thom Tissy, along with Captain Sort and her brainless

mage, Beak.

Keneb eyed the squads then said, 'Sergeants, to me, please.'

Koryk watched Fiddler, Hellian, Gesler, Badan Gruk and Primly all head over to gather in a half-circle in front of the Fist.

'Typical,' muttered Smiles beside him. 'Now we all go up on report. Especially you, Koryk. You don't think anybody's forgotten you murdering that official in Malaz City – so they know you're the one to watch for.'

'Oh, be quiet,' Koryk muttered. 'They're just deciding now which squad dies first.'

That shut her up quick enough.

'You've all done damned well,' Keneb said in a low voice, 'but now the serious work begins.'

Gesler snorted. 'Think we didn't know that, Fist?'

'Still in the habit of irritating your superiors, I see.'

Gesler flashed his typical grin. 'How many you bring with you, sir, if I might ask? Because, you see, I'm starting to smell something and it's a bad smell. We can handle two to one odds. Three to one, even. But I've got a feeling we're about to find ourselves outnumbered what, ten to one? Twenty? Now, maybe you've brought us some more munitions, but unless you've got four or five wagons full hidden back of the column, it won't be enough—'

'That's not our problem,' Fiddler said, pulling a nit from his beard and cracking it between his teeth. 'There'll be mages and I know for a fact, Fist, that ours are used up. Even Bottle, and that's saying a lot.' Fiddler then scowled at Beak. 'What in Hood's name are you smiling about?'

Beak wilted, moved to hide behind Faradan Sort.

The captain seemed to bridle. 'Listen, Fiddler, maybe you know nothing about this mage here, but I assure you he has combat magicks. Beak, can you hold your own in what's to come?'

A low murmuring reply: 'Yes sir. You'll see. Everyone will because you're all my friends and friends are important. The most important thing in the world. And I'll show you.'

Fiddler winced and looked away, then squinted. 'Shit, we're losing the night.'

'Form up for the march,' Keneb ordered and damn, Fiddler observed, the Fist was looking old right now. 'We'll alternate to double-time every hundred paces – from what I understand, we don't have very far to go.'

'Until the way ahead is full of enemy,' Gesler said. 'Hope at least it's within sight of Letheras. I'd like to see the damned walls before I feed the weeds.'

'Enough of that, Sergeant. Dismissed.'

Fiddler didn't respond to Gesler's grin when they headed back to their squads.

'Come on, Fid, all those talents of yours got to be all screaming the same thing right now, aren't they?'

'Aye, they're all screaming at you to shut your damned mouth, Ges.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas had collected almost more weapons than he could carry. Four of the better spears, two javelins. A single-edged sword something like a scimitar; a nice long, straight Letherii longsword with a sharply tapered point, filed down from what had been a blunted end; two sticker knives and a brace of gutters as well. Strapped to his back was a Letherii shield, wood, leather and bronze. He also carried a crossbow and twenty-seven quarrels. And one sharper.

They were headed, he well knew, to their last stand, and it would be heroic. Glorious. It would be as it should have been with Leoman of the Flails. They would stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder, until not one was left alive. And years from now, songs would be sung of this dawning day. And there would be, among the details, a tale of one soldier, wielding spears and javelins and swords and knives and heaps of bodies at his feet. A warrior who had come from Seven Cities, yes, from thousands of leagues

away, to finally give the proper ending to the Great Uprising of his homeland. A rebel once more, in the outlawed, homeless Fourteenth Army who were now called the Bonehunters, and whose own bones would be hunted, yes, for their magical properties, and sold for stacks of gold in markets. Especially Corabb's own skull, larger than all the others, once home to a vast brain filled with genius and other brilliant thoughts. A skull not even a king could afford, yes, especially with the sword blade or spear clove right through it as lasting memento to Corabb's spectacular death, the last marine standing—

'For Hood's sake, Corabb,' snapped Cuttle behind him, 'I'm dodging more spear butts now than I will in a bell's time! Get rid of some of them, will you?'

'I cannot,' Corabb replied. 'I shall need them all.'

'Now that doesn't surprise me, the way you treat your weapons.'

'There will be many enemy that need killing, yes.'

'That Letherii shield is next to useless,' Cuttle said. 'You should know that by now, Corabb.'

'When it breaks I shall find another.'

He so looked forward to the imminent battle. The screams, the shrieks of the dying, the shock of the enemy as it reeled back, repulsed again and again. The marines had earned it, oh yes. The fight they had all been waiting for, outside the very walls of Letheras – and the citizens would line them to watch, with wonder, with astonishment, with awe, as Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas unleashed such ferocity as to sear the souls of every witness . . .

Hellian was never drinking *that* stuff again. Imagine, sick, still drunk, thirsty and hallucinating all at once. Almost as bad as that night of the Paralt Festival in Kartool, with all those people wearing giant spider costumes and Hellian, in a screaming frenzy, trying to stamp on all of them.

Now, she was trudging at the head of her paltry squad in the grainy half-light of dawn, and from the snatches of conversation that penetrated her

present state of disrepair she gathered that the Edur were right behind them, like ten thousand giant spiders with fangs that could shoot out and skewer innocent seagulls and terrified women. And even worse, this damned column was marching straight for a giant web eager to ensnare them all.

Meanwhile, there were the hallucinations. Her corporal splitting in two, for example. One here, one there, both talking at once but not the same thing and not even in the same voice. And what about that doe-eyed fool with the stupid name who was now always hovering close? Scab Breath? Skulldent? Whatever, she had ten years on him easy, maybe more, or that's how it seemed since he had that smooth baby-skin – Babyskin? – face that made him look, gods, fourteen or so. All breathless with some bizarre story about being a prince and the last of a royal line and saving seeds to plant in perfect soil where cacti don't grow and now he wanted . . . wanted what? She couldn't be sure, but he was triggering all sorts of nasty thoughts in her head, above all an overwhelming desire to corrupt the boy so bad he'd never see straight ever again, just to prove that she wasn't someone anybody messed with without getting all messed up themselves. So maybe it all came down to power. The power to crush innocence and that was something even a terrified woman could do, couldn't she?

Passing through another village and oh, this wasn't a good sign. It'd been systematically flattened. Every building nothing but rubble. Armies did things like that to remove cover, to eliminate the chance of establishing redoubts and all that sort of thing. No trees beyond, either, just a level stretch of ploughed fields with the hedgerows cut down to stumps and the crops all burnt to blackened stubble and already the morning sun was lancing deadly darts into her skull, forcing her to down a few mouthfuls of her dwindling supply of Falari rum from the transports.

Steadying her some, thank Hood.

Her corporal merged back into one, which was a good sign, and he was pointing ahead and talking about something—

'What? Wait, Touchy Breath, wha's that you're saying?'

'The rise opposite, Sergeant! See the army waiting for us? See it? Gods above, we're finished! Thousands! No, worse than thousands—'

'Be quiet! I can see 'em well enough—'

'But you're looking the wrong way!'

'That's no matter either way, Corporal. I still see 'em, don't I? Now stop crowding me and go find Urb – got to keep 'im close to keep 'im alive, the clumsy fool.'

'He won't come, Sergeant.'

'Wha' you talkin' 'bout?'

'It's Skulldeath, you see. He's announced that he's given his heart to you —'

'His what? Listen, you go an' tell Hearty Death that he can have his skull back cause I don't wannit, but I'll take his cock once we're done killing all these bassards or maybe even before then if there's a chance, but in the meantime, drag Urb here because I'm 'sponsible for 'im, you see, for letting' 'im kick in that temple door.'

'Sergeant, he won't—'

'How come your voice keeps changin'?'

'So,' said the commander of the Letherii forces arrayed along the ridge, 'there they are. What do you judge, Sirryn Kanar? Under a thousand? I would believe so. All the way from the coast. Extraordinary.'

'They have survived thus far,' Sirryn said, scowling, 'because they are unwilling to stand and fight.'

'Rubbish,' the veteran officer replied. 'They fought the way they needed to, and they did it exceptionally well, as Hanradi and his Edur would attest. Under a thousand, by the Errant. What I could do with ten thousand such soldiers, Finadd. Pilott, Korshenn, Descent, T'roos, Isthmus – we could conquer them all. Two campaign seasons, no more than that.'

'Be that as it may,' Sirryn said, 'we're about to kill them all, sir.'

'Yes, Finadd,' the commander sighed. 'So we are.' He hesitated, then cast Sirryn an oddly sly glance. 'I doubt there will be much opportunity to excessively bleed the Tiste Edur, Finadd. They have done their task, after all, and now need only dig in behind these Malazans – and when the poor fools break, as they will, they will be routing right into Hanradi's Edur spears, and that will be the end of that.'

Sirryn Kanar shrugged. 'I still do not understand how these Malazans could have believed a thousand of their soldiers would be enough to conquer our empire. Even with their explosives and such.'

'You forget their formidable sorcery, Finadd.'

'Formidable at stealth, at hiding them from our forces. Naught else. And now, such talents have no use at all. We see our enemy, sir, and they are exposed, and so they will die.'

'Best we get on with it, then,' the commander said, somewhat shortly, as he turned to gesture his mages forward.

Below, on the vast plain that would be the killing field for this invading army – if it could even be called that – the Malazan column began, with alacrity, reforming into a defensive circle. The commander grunted. 'They hold to no illusions, Finadd, do they? They are finished and they know it. And so, there will be no rout, no retreat of any sort. Look at them! There they will stand, until none stand.'

Gathered now into their defensive circle, in very nearly the centre of the killing field, the force suddenly seemed pathetically small. The commander glanced at his seven mages, now arrayed at the very crest of the ridge and beginning the end of their ritual – which had been a week in the making. Then back to the distant huddle of Malazans. 'Errant bless peace upon their souls,' he whispered.

* * *

It was clear that Atri-Preda Bivatt, impatient as she no doubt was, had at the last moment decided to draw out the beginning of battle, to let the sun

continue its assault on the mud of the seabed. Alas, such delay was not in Redmask's interest, and so he acted first.

The Letherii mages each stood within a protective ring of soldiers carrying oversized shields. They were positioned beyond arrow range, but Bivatt well knew their vulnerability nonetheless, particularly once they began their ritual summoning of power.

Toc Anaster, seated on his horse to permit him a clearer view, felt the scarring of his missing eye blaze into savage itching, and he could feel how the air grew charged, febrile, as the two mages bound their wills together. They could not, he suspected, maintain control for very long. The sorcery would need to erupt, would need to be released. To roll in foaming waves down into the seabed, blistering their way across the ground to crash into the Awl lines. Where warriors would die by the hundreds, perhaps by the thousands.

Against such a thing, Redmask's few shamans could do nothing. All that had once given power to the plains tribe was torn, very nearly shredded by displacement, by the desecration of holy grounds, by the deaths of countless warriors and elders and children. The Awl culture, Toc now understood, was crumbling, and to save it, to resurrect his people, Redmask needed victory this day, and he would do anything to achieve it.

Including, if need be, the sacrifice of his K'Chain Che'Malle.

Beneath their strange armour, beneath the fused swords at the end of the K'ell Hunter's arms, beneath their silent language and inexplicable alliance with Redmask of the Awl, the K'Chain Che'Malle were reptiles, and their blood was cold, and deep in their brains, perhaps, could be found ancient memories, recollections of a pre-civilized existence, a wildness bound in the skein of instincts. And so the patience of a supreme predator coursed in that chill blood.

Reptiles. *Damned lizards.*

Thirty or so paces from where stood the mages and their guardian soldiers, the slope reached down to the edge of the ancient sea, where the

mud stretched out amidst tufts of smeared, flattened grasses, and where run-off had pooled before slowly ebbing away into the silts beneath.

The K'Chain Che'Malle had wallowed down into that mud, quite possibly even as the rains continued to thrash down in darkness. Huge as they were, they had proved skilled at burying themselves so that no sign was visible of their presence – no sign at least to a casual viewer. And after all, who could have imagined such enormous beasts were capable of simply disappearing from sight?

And Redmask had guessed more or less correctly where the mages would position themselves; indeed, he had invited such placements, where waves of magic would converge to maximum effect against his waiting warriors. Neither Sag'Churok nor Gunth Mach rose to find themselves too far away for that sudden, devastating rush upslope.

Screams of terror as the flat clay seemed to erupt at the old shoreline, and then, mud cascading from their backs, the demonic creatures were racing upslope, each closing in on one of the mages.

Panicked retreat – flight from the guards, flinging shields and swords away – exposing the hapless mages, both of whom sought to unleash their sorcery—

—no time, as Sag'Churok's twin blades slashed out and the first mage seemed to vanish in a bloom of blood and meat—

—no time, as Gunth Mach leapt high in the air then landed with splayed talons directly atop the second, cowering mage, crushing him in a snap of bones—

And then the beasts wheeled, racing back in zigzag patterns as flights of arrows descended. Those that struck bounced or, rarely, penetrated the thick scaled hide enough to hold fixed in place, until the creature's motion worked them loose.

In the wake of this sudden horror, the Letherii horns sounded like cries of rage, and all at once the wedges were moving down the slope, and some

battle song lifted skyward to set cadence – but it was a shrill sound, erupting from the throats of shaken soldiers—

*As easily as that,* Toc Anaster reflected, *this battle begins.*

Behind him, Torrent was dancing in gleeful frenzy.

Shouting: *'Redmask! Redmask! Redmask! '*

The wedges edged out onto the seabed and visibly sagged as momentum slowed. Between them milled the archers, skirmishers and some medium infantry, and Toc saw soldiers slipping, falling, boots skidding out as they sought purchase to draw bowstrings – *chaos*. The heavy infantry in front were now sinking to their knees, while those at the back stumbled into those before them, as the rhythm broke, then utterly collapsed.

A second set of horns sounded as soon as each entire wedge was on the flat, and all forward motion ceased. A moment of relative silence as the wedges reformed, then a new song emerged from the soldiers, this one deeper, more assured, and carrying a slower cadence, a drawn-out beat that proved the perfect match to an advance of one step at a time, with a settling pause between it and the next.

Toc grunted in admiration. That was impressive control indeed, and it looked to be working.

*They will reach the Awl lines intact. Still, no solid footing to fix shields or swing weapons with strength. Gods, this is going to be bloody.*

For all of Redmask's creativity, he was not, in Toc's judgement, a tactical genius. Here, he had done all he could to gain advantage, displaying due competence. Without the K'Chain Che'Malle, this battle might already be over. In any case, Redmask's second surprise could not – for anyone – have been much of a surprise at all.

Natarkas, face slick with sweat behind his red mask, eased his horse into a canter. Surrounding him was the sound of thunder. Two thousand chosen warriors rode with him across the plain. As the canter was loosed into a gallop, lances were set, shields settled to cover groin, hip and chest.

Natarkas had led his cavalry through the night's rain, east of the seabed, then north and finally, as false dawn licked the darkness, westward.

At dawn, they were positioned a third of a league behind the Letherii forces. Arrayed into a wedge with Natarkas himself positioned in the centre of the sixth row. Awaiting the first sounds of battle.

Redmask had been adamant with his instructions. If enemy scouts found them, they were to wait, and wait yet longer, listening to the sounds of battle for at least two turns of the wheel. If they believed themselves undiscovered – if the opportunity for surprise remained – when the sounds of fighting commenced, Natarkas was to immediately lead his cavalry into an attack on the rear formations of the enemy forces – on, no doubt, the Tiste Edur. There was to be no deviation from these instructions.

At dawn, his own scouts had ridden to Natarkas to announce that a mounted troop of Edur had discovered them. And he thought back to Redmask the night before. *'Natarkas, do you understand why, if you are seen, I want you to hold? To not immediately charge? No? Then I will explain. If you are seen, I must be able to exploit that in the battle on the seabed. At least two wheels you must wait, doing nothing. This will lock the Tiste Edur in place. It may even draw out the Bluerose cavalry – and should they approach you, invite them to the chase – lead them away, yes, and keep leading them away. Do not engage them, Natarkas! You will be savaged! Run their horses into the dust – you see, they will cease to matter by then, and Bivatt will not have them at her disposal. This is important! Do you understand my commands?'*

Yes, he did understand them. If surprise was lost, he was to lead his Awl . . . away. Like cowards. But they had played the cowards before, and that was a truth that burned in his heart. Flaring into agony whenever he saw the Mezla, Toc Anaster, yes, the one-eyed foreigner who stood as living proof to a time of such darkness among the Awl that Natarkas could barely breathe whenever he thought about it.

And he knew his fellow warriors felt the same. The hollowness inside, the terrible need to give answer, to reject the past in the only way now left to them.

They had been seen, yes.

But they would not run. Nor would they wait. They would ride to the sounds of battle. They would sight the hated enemy, and they would charge.

*Redemption. Do you understand that word, Redmask? No? Then, we shall show you its meaning.*

'Sister Shadow, they're coming.' Brohl Handar tightened the strap of his helm. 'Ready your spears!' he bellowed to his warriors, and along the entire front line, two ranks deep, the iron points of the spears flashed downward. The foremost rank knelt, angling their points to the chest height of the approaching horses, while the row behind them remained standing, ready to thrust. 'Shields to guard!' The third rank edged forward half a step to bring their shields into a guard position beneath the weapon arms of the warriors in the second row.

Brohl turned to one of his runners. 'Inform the Atri-Preda that we face a cavalry charge, and I strongly advise she order the Bluerose to mount up for a flank attack – the sooner we are done with this the sooner we can join the fight on the seabed.'

He watched as the youth rushed off.

The wedges were on the flat now, he understood, employing the step and settle advance Bivatt had devised in order to adjust to the mud. They were probably nearing the Awl lines, although yet to clash. The Atri-Preda had another tactic for that moment, and Brohl Handar wished her well.

The slaying of the mages had been a grim opening to this day's battle, but the Overseer's confidence had, if anything, begun to grow.

*These fools charge us! They charge a forest of spears! It is suicide!*

Finally, he realized, they could end this. Finally, this absurd war could end. By day's close, not a single Awl would remain alive. Not one.

The thunder of hoofs. Lances lowered, the horses with necks stretched out, the warriors hunching down – closer, closer, then, all at once, *chaos*.

No horse could be made to run into a wall of bristling spears. In the midst of the Awl lancers were mounted archers, and as the mass of riders drew to within a hundred paces of Edur, these archers rose on their stirrups and released a swarm of arrows.

The first row of Edur, kneeling with spears planted, had leaned their rectangular Letherii shields against their shoulders – the best they could manage with both hands on the spear shaft. Those immediately behind them were better protected, but the spear-hedge, as the Letherii called it, was vulnerable.

Warriors screamed, spun round by the impact of arrows. The row rippled, wavered, was suddenly ragged.

Horses could not be made to run into a wall of bristling spears. But, if sufficiently trained, they could be made to hammer into a mass of human flesh. And, among those still facing spears positioned at chest height, they could jump.

A second flight of arrows slanted out at forty or so paces. Then a third at ten paces.

The facing side of the Edur square was a ragged mess by the time the charge struck home. Beasts launched themselves into the air, straining to clear the first spears, only to intercept other iron-headed points – but none of these were butted into the ground, and while serrated edges slashed through leather plates and the flesh beneath, many were driven aside or punched back. In the gaps in the front line, the horses plunged into the ranks of Edur, flinging warriors away, trampling others. Lances thudded into reeling bodies, skidded from desperate shield blocks, kissed faces and throats in a welter of blood.

Brohl Handar, positioned behind his Edur square, stared in horror as the entire block of Arapay warriors seemed to recoil, flinch back, then inexorably fold inward from the facing side.

The Awl wedge had driven deep and was now exploding from within the disordered square. The impact had driven warriors back, fouling those behind them, in a rippling effect that spread through the entire formation.

Among the Awl, in the midst of jostling, stumbling Edur, heavy cutting swords appeared as lances were shattered, splintered or left in bodies. In screaming frenzy, the savages were hacking down on all sides.

Horses went down, kicking, lashing out in their deaththroes. Spears stabbed upwards to lift Awl warriors from their saddles.

The square was seething madness.

And horses continued to go down, whilst others backed, despite the shrieking commands of their riders. More spears raked riders from their saddles, crowds closing about individuals.

All at once, the Awl were seeking to withdraw, and the Edur warriors began pushing, the square's flanks advancing in an effort to enclose the attackers.

Someone was screaming at Brohl Handar. Someone at his side, and he turned to see one of his runners.

Who was pointing westward with frantic gestures.

Bluerose cavalry, forming up.

Brohl Handar stared at the distant ranks, the sun-lashed lance-heads held high, the horses' heads lifting and tossing, then he shook himself. 'Sound close ranks! The square does not pursue! Close ranks and let the enemy withdraw!'

Moments later, horns blared.

The Awl did not understand. Panic was already among them, and the sudden recoiling of those now advancing Edur struck them as an opportunity. Eager to disengage, the horse-warriors sprang away from all contact – twenty paces – archers twisting in their saddles to loose arrows – forty, fifty paces, and a copper-faced officer among them yelling at his troops to draw up, to reform for another charge – and there was thunder in the west, and that warrior turned in his saddle, and saw, descending upon his milling ranks, his own death.

His death, and that of his warriors.

Brohl Handar watched as the commander frantically tried to wheel his troops, to set them, to push the weary, bloodied beasts and their equally weary riders into a meeting charge – but it was too late. Voices cried out in fear as warriors saw what was descending upon them. The confusion redoubled, and then riders were breaking, fleeing—

All at once, the Bluerose lancers swept into them.

Brohl Handar looked down upon his Arapay – *Sister Shadow, but we have been wounded.* 'Sound the slow advance!' he commanded, stepping forward and drawing his sword. 'We will finish what the Bluerose have begun.' *I want those bastards. Every damned one of them. Screaming in pain, dying by our blades!*

Something dark and savage swirled awake within him. Oh, there would be pleasure in killing. Here. Now. *Such pleasure.*

As the Bluerose charge rolled through the Awl cavalry, a broad-bladed lance caught Natarkas – still shrieking his commands to wheel – in the side of the head. The point punched through low on his left temple, beneath the rim of the bronze-banded helm. It shattered that plate of the skull, along with his cheekbone and the orbit of the eye. Then drove still deeper, through brain and nasal cavity.

Blackness bloomed in his mind.

Beneath him – as he toppled, twisted round when the lance dragged free – his horse staggered before the impact of the attacker's own mount; then, as the weight of Natarkas's body rolled away, the beast bolted, seeking a place away from this carnage, this terror.

All at once, open plain ahead and two other riderless horses racing away, heads high in sudden freedom.

Natarkas's horse set off after them.

The chaos in its heart dwindled, faded, fluttered away with every exultant breath the beast drew into its aching lungs.

*Free!*

*Never! Free!*

*Never again!*

On the seabed, the heavy infantry wedges advanced beneath the now constant hail of descending arrows. Skittering on raised shields, glancing from visored helms, stabbing down through gaps in armour and chance ricochets. Soldiers cried out, stumbled, recovered or sought to fall – but these latter were suddenly grasped by hands on either side and bodies closed in, keeping them upright, feet now dragging as life poured its crimson gift to the churned mud below. Those hands then began pushing the dead and the dying forward, through the ranks. Hands reaching back, grasping, tugging and pulling, then pushing into yet more waiting hands.

Through all of this, the chant continued, the wait beat marked each settling step.

Twelve paces from the Awl on their islands of dry, able now to see into faces, to see the blazing eyes filled with fear or rage.

This slow advance could not but unnerve the waiting Awl. Human spear-heads, edging ever closer. Massive iron fangs, inexorably looming, step, wait, step, wait, step.

And now, eight paces away, arrow-riddled corpses were being flung forward from the front ranks, the bodies sprawling into the mud. Shields followed here and there. Boots settled atop these things, pushing them into the mud.

Bodies and shields, appearing in a seemingly unending stream.

Building, there in the last six strides, a floor of flesh, leather, wood and armour.

Javelins sleeted into those wedges, driving soldiers back and down, only to have their bodies thrust forward with chilling disregard. The wounded bled out. The wounded drowned screaming in the mud. And each wedge seemed to lift itself up and out of the mud, although the cadence did not change.

Four steps. Three.

And, at a bellowing shout, the points of those enormous wedges suddenly drove forward.

Into human flesh, into set shields, spears. Into the Awl.

Each and every mind dreamed of victory. Of immortality. And, among them all, not one would yield.

The sun stared down, blazing with eager heat, on Q'uson Tapi, where two civilizations locked throat to throat.

One last time.

A fateful decision, maybe, but he'd made it now. Dragging with him all the squads that had been in the village, Fiddler took over from some of Keneb's more beat-up units the west-facing side of their turtleback defence. No longer standing eye to eye with that huge Letherii army and its Hood-cursed sorcerers. No, here they waited, and opposite them, drawing up in thick ranks, the Tiste Edur.

Was it cowardice? He wasn't sure, and from the looks he caught in the eyes of his fellow sergeants – barring Hellian who'd made a temporarily unsuccessful grab at Skulldeath, or more precisely at his crotch, before Primly intervened – they weren't sure, either.

*Fine, then, I just don't want to see my death come rolling down on me. Is that cowardly? Aye, by all counts it couldn't be anything but. Still, there's this. I don't feel frightened.*

No, all he wanted right now, beyond what Hellian so obviously wanted, of course, all he wanted, then, was to die fighting. To see the face of the bastard who killed him, to pass on, in that final meeting of eyes, all that dying meant, must have meant and would always mean . . . *whatever that was, and let's hope I do a better job of letting my killer know whatever it is – better, that is, than all those whose eyes I've looked into as they died at my hand. Aye, seems a worthy enough prayer.*

*But I ain't praying to you, Hood.*

*In fact, damned if I know who I'm praying to, but even that doesn't seem to matter.*

His soldiers were digging holes but not saying much. They'd received a satchelful of munitions, including two more cussers, and while that wasn't nearly enough it made it advisable to dig the holes where they could crouch for cover when those sharpers, cussers and all the rest started going off.

All of this, dammit, assumed there would be fighting.

Far more likely, magic would sweep over the Malazans, one and all, grabbing at their throats even as it burned away skin, muscle and organs, burned away even their last desperate, furious screams.

Fiddler vowed to make his last scream a curse. A good one, too.

He stared across at the rows of Tiste Edur.

Beside him, Cuttle said, 'They don't like it neither, you know.'

Fiddler replied with a wordless grunt.

'That's their leader, that old one with the hunched shoulders. Too many paying him too much attention. I plan to take him out, Fid – with a cusser. Listen – are you listening? As soon as that wave of magic starts its roll, we should damn well up and charge these bastards.'

Not a bad idea, actually. Blinking, Fiddler faced the sapper, and then nodded. 'Pass the word, then.'

At that moment one of Thom Tissy's soldiers jogged into their midst. 'Fist's orders,' he said, looking round. 'Where's your captain?'

'Holding Beak's hand, somewhere else,' Fiddler replied. 'You can give those orders to me, soldier.'

'All right. Maintain the turtleback – do not advance on the enemy—'

'That's fucking—'

'Enough, Cuttle!' Fiddler snapped. To the runner he nodded and said, 'How long?'

A blank expression answered that question.

Fiddler waved the idiot on, then turned once more to stare across at the Tiste Edur.

'Damn him, Fid!'

'Relax, Cuttle. We'll set out when we have to, all right?'

'Sergeant?' Bottle was suddenly crawling out of the hole he'd dug, and there was a strained look on his face. 'Something . . . something's happening —'

At that moment, from the ridge to the east, a bloodchilling sound – like ten thousand anchor chains ripping up from the ground, and there rose a virulent wall of swirling magic. Dark purple and shot through with crimson veins, black etchings like lightning darting along the crest as it rose, higher, yet higher—

'Hood's balls!' Cuttle breathed, eyes wide.

Fiddler simply stared. This was the sorcery they'd seen off the north coast of Seven Cities. Only, then they'd had Quick Ben with them. And Bottle had his – he reached out and pulled Bottle close. 'Listen! Is she—'

'No, Fid! Nowhere! She's not been with me since we landed. I'm sorry—'

Fiddler flung the man back down.

The wall heaved itself still higher.

The Tiste Edur along the western edge of the killing field were suddenly pulling back.

Cuttle yelled, *'We need to go now! Fiddler! Now! '*

Yet he could not move. Could not answer, no matter how the sapper railed at him. Could only stare, craning, ever upward. Too much magic. 'Gods above,' he muttered, '*talk about overkill*.'

Run away from this? Not a chance.

Cuttle dragged him round.

Fiddler scowled and pushed the man back, hard enough to make the sapper stumble. 'Fuck running, Cuttle! You think we can out-run *that*?'

'But the Edur—'

'It's going to take them too – can't you see that?' *It has to – no-one can control it once it's released – no-one.* 'Those Hood-damned Edur have been set up, Cuttle!' *Oh yes, the Letherii wanted to get rid of their masters – they just didn't want to do it with us as allies. No, they'll do it their way and take out both enemies at the same damned time . . .*

Three hundred paces to the west, Hanradi stared up at that Letherii magic. And understood, all at once. He *understood*.

'We have been betrayed,' he said, as much to himself as to the warriors standing close by. 'That ritual – it has been days in the making. Maybe weeks. Once unleashed . . .' *the devastation will stretch for leagues westward*.

*What to do?*

*Father Shadow, what to do?* 'Where are my K'risnan?' he suddenly demanded, turning to his aides.

Two Edur hobbled forward, their faces ashen.

'Can you protect us?'

Neither replied, and neither would meet Hanradi's eyes.

'Can you not call upon Hannan Mosag? Reach through to the Ceda, damn you!'

'You do not understand!' one of the once-young K'risnan shouted. 'We are – all – we are all abandoned!'

'But Kurald Emurlahn—'

'Yes! Awake once more! But we cannot reach it! Nor can the Ceda!'

'And what of that *other* power? The chaos?'

'Gone! Fled!'

Hanradi stared at the two warlocks. He drew his sword and lashed the blade across the nearest one's face, the edge biting through bridge of nose and splitting both eyeballs. Shrieking, the figure reeled back, hands at his face. Hanradi stepped forward and drove his sword into the creature's twisted chest, and the blood that gushed forth was almost black.

Tugging the weapon free, Hanradi turned to the other one, who cowered back. 'You warlocks,' the once-king said in a grating voice, 'are the cause of this. All of this.' He took another step closer. 'Would that you were Hannan Mosag crouched before me now—'

'Wait!' the K'risnan shrieked, suddenly pointing eastward. 'Wait! One gives answer! One gives answer!'

Hanradi turned, eyes focusing with some difficulty on the Malazans – so overwhelming was the wave of Letherii magic that a shadow had descended upon the entire killing field.

Rising from that huddled mass of soldiers, a faint, luminous glow. Silver, vaguely pulsing.

Hanradi's laugh was harsh. 'That pathetic thing is an answer?' He half raised his sword.

'No!' the K'risnan cried. 'Wait! Look, you stupid fool! *Look!* '

And so he did, once again.

And saw that dome of silver light burgeoning, spreading out to engulf the entire force – and it thickened, became opaque—

The last K'risnan clutched at Hanradi's arm. 'Listen to me! Its power – Father Shadow! *Its power!* '

'Can it hold?' Hanradi demanded. *'Can it hold against the Letherii? '*

He saw no answer in the K'risnan's red-rimmed eyes.

*It cannot – look, still, it is tiny – against that ever-growing wave—*

*But . . . it need be no larger than that, need it? It engulfs them all.*

'Sound the advance!' he shouted. 'At the double!'

Wide eyes fixed on Hanradi, who pointed at that scintillating dome of ethereal power. 'At the very least we can crouch in its shadow! Now, move forward! Everyone!'

Beak, who had once possessed another name, a more boring name, had been playing in the dirt that afternoon, on the floor of the old barn where no-one went any more and that was far away from the rest of the buildings of the estate, far enough away to enable him to imagine he was alone in an abandoned world. A world without trouble.

He was playing with the discarded lumps of wax he collected from the trash heap below the back wall of the main house. The heat of his hands could change their shape, like magic. He could mould faces from the pieces and build entire families like those families down in the village, where boys and girls his age worked alongside their parents and when not working played in the woods and were always laughing.

This was where his brother found him. His brother with the sad face so unlike the wax ones he liked to make. He arrived carrying a coil of rope, and stood just inside the gaping entrance with its jammed-wide doors all overgrown.

Beak, who had a more boring name back then, saw in his brother's face a sudden distress, which then drained away and a faint smile took its place which was a relief since Beak always hated it when his brother went off somewhere to cry. Older brothers should never do that and if he was older, why, he'd never do that.

His brother then walked towards him, and still half smiling he said, 'I need you to leave, little one. Take your toys and leave here.'

Beak stared with wide eyes. His brother never asked such things of him. His brother had always shared this barn. 'Don't you want to play with me?'

'Not now,' his brother replied, and Beak saw that his hands were trembling which meant there'd been trouble back at the estate. Trouble with Mother.

'Playing will make you feel better,' Beak said.

'I know. But not now.'

'Later?' Beak began collecting his wax villagers.

'We'll see.'

There were decisions that did not seem like decisions. And choices could just fall into place when nobody was really looking and that was how things were in childhood just as they were for adults. Wax villagers cradled in his arms, Beak set off, out the front and into the sunlight. Summer days were always wonderful – the sun was hot enough to make the villagers weep with joy, once he lined them up on the old border stone that meant nothing any more.

The stone was about eighteen of Beak's small paces away, toppled down at one corner of the track before it turned and sank down towards the bridge and the stream where minnows lived until it dried up and then they died because minnows could only breathe in water. He had just set his toys down in a row when he decided he needed to ask his brother something.

Decisions and choices, falling.

What was it he had wanted to ask? There was no memory of that. The memory of that was gone, melted down into nothing. It had been a very hot day.

Reaching the entrance he saw his brother – who had been sitting with legs dangling from the loft's edge – slide over to drop down onto the floor. But he didn't drop all the way. The rope round his neck caught him instead.

And then, his face turning dark as his eyes bulged and his tongue pushed out, his brother danced in the air, kicking through the shafts of dusty sunlight.

Beak ran up to him – the game his brother had been playing with the rope had gone all wrong, and now his brother was choking. He threw his arms about his brother's kicking legs and tried with all his might to hold him up.

And there he stood, and perhaps he was screaming, but perhaps he wasn't, because this was an abandoned place, too far away from anyone who might

help.

His brother tried to kick him away. His brother's fists punched down on the top of Beak's head, hard enough to hurt but not so much since those hands couldn't but barely reach him, short as he was being still younger than his brother. So he just held on.

Fire awoke in the muscles of his arms. In his shoulders. His neck. His legs shook beneath him, because he needed to stand on his toes – if he tried to move his arms further down to well below his brother's knees, then his brother simply bent those knees and started choking again.

Fire everywhere, fire right through Beak's body.

His legs were failing. His arms were failing. And as they failed his brother choked. Pee ran down to burn against Beak's wrists and his face. The air was suddenly thick with worse smells and his brother never did things like this – all this mess, the terrible mistake with the rope.

Beak could not hold on, and this was the problem with being a younger brother, with being as he was. And the kicking finally stilled, the muscles of his brother's legs becoming soft, loose. Two fingertips from one of his brother's hands lightly brushed Beak's hair, but they only moved when Beak himself moved, so those fingers were as still as the legs.

It was good that his brother wasn't fighting any more. He must have loosened the rope from round his neck and was now just resting. And that was good because Beak was now on his knees, arms wrapped tight about his brother's feet.

And there he stayed.

Until, three bells after dusk, one of the stable hands from the search party came into the barn with a lantern.

By then, the sun's heat earlier that afternoon had ruined all his villagers, had drawn down their faces into expressions of grief, and Beak did not come back to collect them up, did not reshape them into nicer faces. Those lumps remained on the border stone that meant nothing any more, sinking down in the day after day sun.

After that last day with his brother, there was trouble aplenty in the household. But it did not last long, not long at all.

He did not know why he was thinking about his brother now, as he set ablaze every candle within him to make the world bright and to save all his friends. And before long he no longer sensed anyone else, barring the faint smudges they had become. The captain, the Fist, all the soldiers who were his friends, he let his light unfold to embrace them all, to keep them safe from that frightening, dark magic so eager to rush down upon them.

It had grown too powerful for those seven mages to contain. They had created something that would now destroy them, but Beak would not let it hurt his friends. And so he made his light burn yet brighter. He made of it a solid thing. Would it be enough? He did not know, but it had to be, for without friends there was nothing, no-one.

Brighter, hotter, so hot the wax of the candles burst into clouds of droplets, flaring bright as the sun, one after another. And, when every coloured candle was lit, why, there was white.

And yet more, for as each joined the torrent emanating from him, he felt in himself a cleansing, a scouring away, what priests called *purification* only they really knew nothing about purification because it had nothing to do with offerings of blood or coin and nothing to do with starving yourself and whipping your own back or endlessly chanting until the brain goes numb. Nothing like any of that. Purification, Beak now understood, was final.

Everything glowed, as if lit from fires within. The onceblack stubble of crops blazed back into fierce life. Stones shone like precious gems. Incandescence raged on all sides. Fiddler saw his soldiers and he could see through, in pulsing flashes, to their very bones, the organs huddled within their cages. He saw, along one entire side of Koryk, old fractures on the ribs, the left arm, the shoulder blade, the hip. He saw three knuckle-sized dents on Cuttle's skull beneath the now translucent helm – a rap he had taken when still a babe, soft-boned and vulnerable. He saw the damage between Smiles's legs from all the times she savaged herself. He saw in Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas the coursing blood that held in it the power to

destroy every cancer that struck him, and he was a man under siege from that disease, but it would never kill. Would not even sicken him.

He saw in Bottle coruscating waves of raw power, a refulgence devoid of all control – but that would come. *It will come.*

Corporal Tarr crouched down in the hole he'd dug, and the light emanating from him looked solid as iron.

Among the others he saw more than any mortal would want to see, yet he could not close his eyes, could not look away.

Gesler and Stormy were lit in gold fire. Even Stormy's beard and hair – all spun gold now – a brutal beauty cascading round his face, and the damned fool was laughing.

The world beyond had vanished behind an opaque, curved wall of silver fire. Vague shapes on the other side – yes, he'd seen the Tiste Edur approaching, seeking some kind of shelter.

Fiddler found he was standing, facing that wall, and now he was walking forward. *Because some things matter more than others.* Stepping into that silver fire, feeling it lance through his entire body, neither hot nor cold, neither pain nor joy.

He staggered suddenly, blinking, and not fifteen paces from him crouched hundreds of Tiste Edur. Waiting to die.

* * *

Hanradi knelt with his gaze fixed on the sky, half of which had vanished behind a blackened wall of writhing madness. The crest had begun its toppling advance.

Sudden motion drew his eyes down.

To see a Malazan – now transformed into an apparition of white – beard, hair – the dangling finger bones were now polished, luminous, as was his armour, his weapons. Scoured, polished, even the leather of his harness looked new, supple.

The Malazan met his gaze with silver eyes, then he lifted one perfect hand, and waved them all forward.

Hanradi rose, flinging his sword aside.

His warriors saw. His warriors did the same, and as they all moved forward, the dome of silver fire all at once rushed towards them.

A piercing shriek and Hanradi turned to see his last K'risnan burst into flames – a single blinding instant, then the hapless warlock was simply ash, settling onto the ground—

Beak was happy to save them. He had understood that old sergeant. The twisted mage, alas, could not embrace such purification. Too much of his soul had been surrendered. The others – oh, they were wounded, filled with bitterness that he needed to sweep away, and so he did.

Nothing was difficult any more. Nothing—

At that moment, the wave of Letherii magic descended.

The Letherii commander could not see the killing field, could indeed see nothing but that swirling, burgeoning wall of eager sorcery. Its cruel hunger poured down in hissing clouds.

When it heaved forward, all illusion of control vanished.

The commander, with Sirryn Kanar cowering beside him, saw all seven of his mages plucked from the ground, dragged up into the air, into the wake of that charging wall. Screaming, flailing, then streaks of whipping blood as they were torn apart moments before vanishing into the dark storm.

The sorcery lurched, then plunged down upon the killing field.

*Detonation.*

Soldiers were thrown from their feet. Horses were flung onto their sides, riders tumbling or pinned as the terrified beasts rolled onto their backs. The entire ridge seemed to ripple, then buckle, and sudden slumping pulled soldiers from the edge, burying them in slides racing for the field below.

Mouths were open, screams unleashed in seeming silence, the horror in so many eyes—

The collapsing wave blew apart—

Beak was driven down by the immense weight, the horrible hunger. Yet he would not retreat. Instead, he let the fire within him lash out, devouring every candle, igniting *everything*.

His friends, yes, the only ones he had ever known.

Survival, he realized, could only be found through purity. Of his love for them all – how so many of them had smiled at him, laughed with him. How hands clapped him on the shoulder and even, now and then, tousled his hair.

He would have liked to see the captain one last time, and maybe even kiss her. On the cheek, although of course he would have liked something far more . . . brave. But he was Beak, after all, and he could hold on to but one thing at a time.

Arms wrapped tight, even as the fire began to burn the muscles of his arms. His shoulders and neck. His legs.

He could hold on, now, until they found him.

Those fires were so hot, now, burning – but there was no pain. Pain had been scoured away, cleansed away. Oh, the weight was vast, getting heavier still, but he would not let go. Not of his brothers and his sisters, the ones he so loved.

*My friends.*

* * *

The Letherii sorcery broke, bursting into clouds of white fire that corkscrewed skyward before vanishing. Fragments crashed down to either side of the incandescent dome, ripped deep into the earth in black spewing clouds. And, everywhere, it died.

The commander struggled back onto his feet, stared uncomprehending at the scene on the killing field.

To either side his soldiers were stumbling upright once again. Runners appeared, one nearly colliding with him as he careened off a still-kneeling Sirryn Kanar, the woman trying to tell him something. Pointing southward.

'—landing! Another Malazan army, sir! Thousands more! From the river!'

The veteran commander frowned at the woman, whose face was smeared with dirt and whose eyes were brittle with panic.

He looked back down at the killing field. The dome was flickering, dying. But it had held. Long enough, it had held. 'Inform my officers,' he said to the runner. 'Prepare to wheel and fast march to the river – how far? Have they managed a beach-head?'

'If we march straight to the river, sir, we will meet them. And yes, as I was saying, they have landed. There are great warships in the river – scores of them! And—'

'Go, damn you! To my officers!'

Sirryn was now on his feet. He rounded on the commander. 'But sir – these ones below!'

'Leave them to the damned Edur, Sirryn! You wanted them mauled, then you shall have your wish! We must meet the larger force, and we must do so immediately!'

Sword and shield, at last, a battle in which a soldier could die with honour.

Captain Faradan Sort had, like so many other soldiers relatively close to where Beak had sat, been driven to the ground by the ferocity of his magic. She was slow to recover, and even as the silver glow pulsed in fitful death, she saw . . . *white*.

Gleaming armour and weapons. Hair white as snow, faces devoid of all scars. Figures, picking themselves up in a half-daze, rising like perfect conjurations from the brilliant green shoots of some kind of grass that now snarled everything and seemed to be growing before her eyes.

And, turning, she looked upon Beak.

To burn, fire needed fuel.

To save them all, Beak had used all the fuel within him.

In horror, Faradan Sort found herself staring at a collapsed jumble of ashes and scorched bone. But no, there was pattern within that, a configuration, if she could but focus through her tears. *Oh.* The bones of the arms seemed to be hugging the knees, the crumpled skull settled on them.

Like a child hiding in a closet, a child seeking to make himself small, so small . . .

*Beak. Gods below . . . Beak.*

'Plan on returning to your weapons?' Fiddler asked the Edur war leader. 'If you're wanting to start again, that is, we're willing.'

But the elderly warrior shook his head. 'We are done with empire.' Then he added, 'If you would permit us to leave.'

'I can think of quite a few of us who'd be more inclined to kill you all, right now.'

A nod.

'But,' Fiddler then said, as his soldiers gathered behind him, all staring at the Tiste Edur – who were staring back – 'we're not here to conduct genocide. You would leave your Emperor defenceless?'

The war leader pointed northward. 'Our villages lie far away. Few remain there, and they suffer for our absence. I would lead my warriors home, Malazan. To rebuild. To await the return of our families.'

'Go on, then.'

The Tiste Edur elder bowed. Then said, 'Would that we could . . . take back . . . all that we have done.'

'Tell me this. Your Emperor – can he be killed?'

'No.'

Nothing more was said. Fiddler watched as the Edur set off.

Behind him a grunt from Koryk, who then said, 'I was damned sure we'd get a fight today.'

'Fiddler. The Letherii army's marched off,' Gesler said.

'The Adjunct,' Fiddler said, nodding. 'She'll hammer them into the ground.'

'My point is,' Gesler continued, 'our way to Letheras . . . it's an open road. Are we going to let the Adjunct and all those salty soldiers of hers beat us there?'

'Good question,' Fiddler said, turning at last. 'Let's go ask the Fist, shall we?'

'Aye, and maybe we can find out why we're all still alive, too.'

'Aye, and white, too.'

Gesler tugged off his helm and grinned at Fiddler. 'Speak for yourself, Fid.'

Hair of spun gold. 'Hood take me,' Fiddler muttered, 'that's about as obnoxious a thing as I've ever seen.'

Another helping hand, lifting Beak to his feet. He looked round. Nothing much to see. White sand, a gate of white marble ahead, within which swirled silver light.

The hand gripping his arm was skeletal, the skin a strange hue of green. The figure, very tall, was hooded and wearing black rags. It seemed to be studying the gate.

'Is that where I'm supposed to go, now?' Beak asked.

'Yes.'

'All right. Are you coming with me?'

'No.'

'All right. Well, will you let go of my arm, then?'

The hand fell away. 'It is not common,' the figure then said.

'What?'

'That I attend to . . . arrivals. In person.'

'My name is Beak.'

'Yes.'

'What's through there?'

'Your brother waits for you, Beak. He has been waiting a long time.'

Beak smiled and stepped forward, all at once in a great hurry – the silver light within that gate was beautiful, reminding him of something.

The stranger's voice brought him round: 'Beak.'

'Yes?'

'Your brother. He will not know you. Yet. Do you understand?'

Beak nodded. 'Why aren't you coming with me?'

'I choose to wait . . . for another.'

'My brother,' Beak said, his smile broadening. 'I'm taller now. Stronger. I can save him, can't I?'

A long pause, and then the figure said, 'Yes, Beak, you can save him.'

Yes, that made sense. He set out again. With sure strides. To the gate, into that silver glow, to emerge on the other side in a glade beside a trickling stream. And kneeling near the bank, his brother. The same as he remembered. On the ground on all sides there were hundreds of small wax figures. Smiling faces, an entire village, maybe even a whole town.

Beak walked up to his brother.

Who said, too shy to look up, 'I made all of these, for him.'

'They're beautiful,' Beak said, and he found tears running down his face, which embarrassed him so he wiped them away. Then asked, 'Can I play

with you?'

His brother hesitated, scanning all the figures, then he nodded. 'All right.'

And so Beak knelt down beside his brother.

While, upon the other side of the gate, the god Hood stood, motionless.

Waiting.

A third army rose from the seabed to conquer the others. An army of mud, against whom no shield could defend, through whom no sword could cut to the quick. The precious islands of canvas were now twisted jumbles, fouling the foot, wrapping tight about legs, or pushed down entirely beneath thick silts. Grey-smeared soldier struggled against grey-smeared warrior, locked together in desperation, rage and terror.

The seething mass had become an entity, a chaotic beast writhing and foundering in the mud, and from it rose the deafening clangour of clashing metal and voices erupting in pain and dying.

Soldiers and warriors fell, were then pushed down amidst grey and red, where they soon merged with the ground. Shield walls could not hold, advances were devoured; the battle had become that of individuals sunk to their knees, thrashing in the press.

The beast heaved back and forth, consuming itself in its madness, and upon either side those who commanded sent yet more into the maelstrom.

The wedge of Letherii heavy infantry should have swept the Awl aside, but the weight of their armour became a curse – the soldiers could not move fast enough to exploit breaches, were sluggish in shoring up their own. Fighters became mired, finding themselves suddenly separated from their comrades, and the Awl would then close in, surrounding the soldier, cutting and stabbing until the Letherii went down. Wherever the Letherii could concentrate in greater numbers – from three to thirty – they delivered mayhem, killing scores of their less disciplined enemy. But always, before long, the mud reached up, pulled the units apart.

Along the western edge, for a time, the K'Chain Che'Malle appeared, racing along the flank, unleashing dreadful slaughter.

Bivatt sent archers and spear-wielding skirmishers and, with heavy losses, they drove the two demons away – studded with arrows, the female limping from a deeply driven spear in her left thigh. The Atri-Preda would have then despatched her Bluerose cavalry to pursue the creatures, but she had lost them somewhere to the northeast – where they still pursued the few surviving Awl cavalry – and in any case, the Kechra remained on the seabed, spraying mud with every elongated stride, circling round towards the eastern side of the locked armies.

And, should they attack there, the Atri-Preda had few soldiers left to give answer: only two hundred skirmishers who, without the protection of archers, could do little more than provide a modest wall of spears guarding barely a quarter of the Letherii flank.

Seated atop her restless horse on the rise of the old shoreline, Bivatt cursed in the name of every god she could think of – those damned Kechra! Were they truly unkillable? *No, see the wounded one! Heavy spears can hurt them – Errant take me, do I have a choice?*

She beckoned to one of her few remaining runners. 'Finadd Treval is to lead his skirmishers down to the east flank,' she said. 'Defensive line in case the demons return.'

The messenger raced off.

Bivatt settled her gaze once more upon the battle before her. *At least there's no dust to obscure things.* And the evidence was plain to see. The Letherii were driving the Awl back, slowly advancing wings, at last, to form encircling horns. The fighting had lost none of its ferocity – indeed, the Awl on the outside edges seemed to be redoubling their desperate efforts, recognizing what was happening. Recognizing . . . *the beginning of the end*.

She could not see Redmask. He and his bodyguards had left the central platform half a bell past, rushing into the battle to fill a breach.

The fool had surrendered his overview of the battle, had surrendered his command. His aides carried no standard upon which his warriors could rally. If Redmask was not already dead, he would be covered in mud like all the rest, unrecognizable, useless.

She wanted so to feel exultant, triumphant. But she could see that she'd lost a third – perhaps more – of her entire army.

Because the Awl would not accept the truth. Of course, there could be no surrender – this day was for annihilation – but the fools would not even flee, when clearly they could, remaining on the seabed to prevent any pursuit from cavalry and easily outdistancing their heavier foes on foot. They could flee, damn them, in the hopes to fight another day.

Instead, the bastards stood, fought, killed and then died.

Even the women and elders had joined, adding their torn flesh and spilled blood to the churned morass.

Gods how she hated them!

Brohl Handar, Overseer of the Drene province, tasted the woman's blood in his mouth and, in a rush of pleasure, he swallowed it down. She had poured herself onto him as he'd leaned forward to drive his sword right through her midsection. Into his face, a hot, thick torrent. Tugging his weapon free as she fell back onto the ground, he spun, seeking yet another victim.

His warriors stood on all sides, few moving now beyond struggling to regain their breaths. The slaughtering of the unhorsed and the wounded had seemed fevered, as if every Arapay Tiste Edur had charged into the same nightmare, and yet there had been such glee in this slaying of Awl that its sudden absence filled the air with heavy, turgid shock.

This, Brohl Handar realized, was nothing like killing seals on the shores of his homeland. Necessity yielded a multitude of flavours, some bitter, others excruciatingly sweet. He could still taste that woman's blood, like honey coating his throat.

*Father Shadow, have I gone mad?*

He stared about. Dead Awl, dead horses. Edur warriors with weapons slick and dripping. And already crows were descending to feed.

'Are you injured, Overseer?'

Brohl wiped blood from his face and shook his head. 'Form ranks. We now march to the battle, to kill some more. To kill them all.'

'Yes sir!'

Masarch stumbled his way clear, half blinded by the mud. Where was Redmask? Had he fallen? There was no way to tell. Clutching his side, where a sword-point had punched through the leather armour, and hot blood squeezed between his fingers, the young Renfayar warrior fought through the mud towards the platform – but the enemy were nearly upon it on the east flank, and atop that platform no-one remained.

No matter.

All he desired, at this moment, was to pull away from this mud, to clamber onto those wooden boards. Too many of his comrades had vanished into the cloying sodden silts, raising in his mind horrifying memories of being buried alive – his death night – when madness reached into his brain. No, he would not fall, would not sink down, would not drown with blackness filling his eyes and mouth.

Disbelief raged through him. Redmask, their great leader, who had returned, who had promised them triumph – the end of the Letherii invaders – he had failed the Awl. *And now, we die. Our people. These plains, this land, will surrender even the echoes of our lives. Gone, for ever more.*

He could not accept that.

*Yet it is the truth.*

*Redmask, you have slain us.*

He reached the edge of the platform, stretched out his free hand – the one that should have held a weapon – where had it gone?

A bestial scream behind him and Masarch half turned, in time to see the twisted, grey, cracked face beneath the helm, the white of eyes staring out from thick scales of mud.

Fire burst in Masarch's chest and he felt himself lifted up, balanced on a sword's hilt and its sliding stream of molten iron, thrown onto his back – onto the boards of the platform – and the Letherii was pulling himself up after him, kicking mud from his boots, still pushing with his shortsword – although it could go no further, no deeper, and the weapon was now jammed, having thrust through Masarch's back and gouging deep into the wood. On his knees straddling the Renfayar, the Letherii, smeared teeth bared, stared down into Masarch's eyes, and began tugging at his sword.

He was speaking, the Awl realized, words repeated over and over again in that foul Letherii tongue. Masarch frowned – he needed to understand what the man was saying as the man killed him.

But the world was fading, too fast—

*No, I hear you, soldier, yes. I hear, and yes, I know—*

The Letherii watched the life leave the Awl bastard's young eyes. And though the Letherii's teeth were bared as if in a smile, though his eyes were wide and bright, the words coming from him repeated their litany: 'Keep me alive, please, keep me alive, please, *keep me alive* . . .'

Seventy paces away, Redmask pulled himself onto the back of his horse – one of the few left – and sawed at the reins to swing the beast round. He'd lost his whip, but the crescent axe remained in his hands, gore-spattered, the edges notched.

Gods, he had killed so many, so many, and there were more to come. He knew it, felt it, hungered for it. Heels pounded into the horse's flanks and it surged forward, hoofs kicking up mud. Madness to ride on this, but there was no choice, none at all.

Thousands of Letherii slain, more yet to butcher. Bivatt herself, yes – he rode towards the eastern side of the seething mass, well outside the

encircling horn – oh, that would not last, his warriors would break through. Shattering the bastards and their flimsy lines.

Redmask would – once he was done with Bivatt – return to that slaughter – and yes, here were his K'Chain Che'Malle, thundering to join him. The three of them, together, thrusting like an enormous sword into the Letherii ranks. Again and again, killing all within reach.

Sag'Churok closing in from his right – see those huge arm-swords lift, readying themselves. And Gunth Mach, swinging round to his inside flank, placing herself between Redmask and the jostling line of skirmishers with their pathetic spears – Gunth Mach was limping, but the spear had worked itself loose – or she had dragged it free. These beasts felt no pain.

And they were almost with him, here, yet again, for they had chosen him.

*Victory this day! Victory!*

Sag'Churok drew yet closer, matching the pace of Redmask's horse, and he saw it swing its head to regard him. Those eyes, so cold, so appallingly empty—

The sword lashed out in a blur, taking the horse from the front, at the neck, just above its collarbones. A blow of such savagery and strength that it tore entirely through, cracking hard against the wooden rim of the high saddle. Knocking Redmask back, over the beast's rump, even as the headless horse ran on another half-dozen strides before wavering to one side then collapsing.

He struck the muddy ground on one shoulder, skidded, then rolled to a halt – and onto his feet, straightening, even as Sag'Churok slashed its second blade, taking him above the knees. Blood fountained as he toppled onto his back, and found himself staring at his severed legs, still standing upright in the mud.

Gunth Mach loomed over him, the talons of a hind foot plunging down to close round his chest. The talons punched deep, ribs crushing in that embrace, and Redmask was lifted then thrown through the air – where he intersected the path of one of Sag'Churok's swords. It chopped through his

right shoulder, sending the arm spinning away – still gripping the crescent axe.

Redmask thumped onto the ground once more, already dead.

Three hundred paces to the east, Toc Anaster rose on his stirrups, ignoring Torrent's shrieks of horror, and watched as the two K'Chain Che'Malle padded once more towards what was left of Redmask. The female one kicked at the body, lightly nudging it, then stepped back.

A moment later and the two creatures were thumping away, northeast, heads stretched out, tails horizontal and stiff as spears behind them.

'He failed them,' Toc whispered. What other reason could there be for such a thing? Perhaps, many reasons. Only Redmask could have answered all the mysteries surrounding the K'Chain Che'Malle. Their presence here, their alliance – an alliance now at an end. *Because he failed.*

The suddenness of the execution remained within him, reverberating, a shock.

Beyond, the last of the Awl – no more than a few hundred now – were surrounded, and were dying in their cemetery of mud.

A score of skirmishers had moved out and were drawing nearer – they had seen this last remnant. Toc Anaster on his horse. Torrent. Twenty-odd children deemed too young to die with a weapon in hand – so now they would die anyway.

Still ignoring Torrent's screams of anguish, Toc turned in his saddle, in his mind the thought of killing these children with his own hands – quick thrusts, with his hand over the eyes – and instead he saw, to the southeast, an odd, seething line – bhederin?

*No. That is an army.*

Lone eye squinting, he watched that line drawing closer – yes, they were coming here. *Not Letherii – I see no standards, nothing at all. No, not Letherii.*

Toc glanced back at the skirmishers now jogging towards them. Still a hundred paces away.

One final look, down at the huddled, crying or mute children, and then he untied from his saddle the leather satchel containing his poems. 'Torrent!' he snapped, flinging the bag to the warrior – who caught it, his rash-mottled face streaked with mud and tears, his eyes wide and uncomprehending.

Toc pointed to the distant line. 'See? An army – not Letherii. Was there not word of the Bolkando and allies? Torrent, listen to me, damn you! You're the last – you and these children. Take them, Torrent – take them and if there's a single guardian spirit left to your people, then this need not be the last day of the Awl. Do you understand?'

'But—'

'Torrent – just go, damn you!' Toc Anaster, last of the Grey Swords of Elingarth, a Mezla, drew out his bow and nocked the first stone-tipped arrow on the gut string. 'I can buy you some time – but you have to go *now*!'

And he looped the reins round the saddle horn, delivering pressure with his knees as he leaned forward, and he rode – for the Letherii skirmishers.

Mud flew out as the horse stretched out into a gallop. *Hood's breath, this won't be easy.*

Fifty paces away from the foot soldiers, he rose on his stirrups, and began loosing arrows.

The seabed that Torrent guided the children along was a gentle, drawn-out slope, rising to where that army was, the mass of dark figures edging ever closer. No standards, nothing to reveal who they were, but he saw that they did not march in ordered ranks. Simply a mass, as the Awl might march, or the Ak'ryn or D'rhasilhani plains tribes of the south.

If this army belonged to either of those two rival tribes, then Torrent was probably leading these children to their deaths. *So be it, we are dead anyway.*

Another ten slogging paces, then he slowed, the children drawing in round him. One hand settling on the head of one child, Torrent halted, and turned about.

Toc Anaster deserved that much. A witness. Torrent had not believed there was courage left in the strange man. He had been wrong.

The horse was unhappy. Toc was unhappy. He had been a soldier, once, but he was no longer. He had been young – had felt young – and that had fed the fires of his soul. Even a shard of burning stone stealing his handsome face, not to mention an eye, had not proved enough to tear away his sense of invulnerability.

Prisoner to the Domin had changed all of that. The repeated destruction delivered upon his bones and flesh, the twisted healing that followed each time, the caging of his soul until even his own screams sounded like music – this had taken his youthful beliefs, taken them so far away that even nostalgia triggered remembrances of nothing but agony.

Arising in the body of another man should have given him all that a new life promised. But inside, he had remained Toc the Younger. Who had once been a soldier, but was one no longer.

Life with the Grey Swords had not altered that. They had travelled to this land, drawn by the Wolves with gifts of faint visions, murky prophecies born in confused dreams: some vast conflagration awaited them – a battle where they would be needed, desperately needed.

Not, it had turned out, alongside the Awl.

A most fatal error in judgement. The wrong allies. The wrong war.

Toc had never trusted the gods anyway. Any god. In truth, his list of those whom he did trust was, after all he had been through, pathetically short.

*Tattersail. Ganoes Paran. Gruntle.*

*Tool.*

A sorceress, a mediocre captain, a caravan guard and a damned T'lan Imass.

Would that they were with him now, riding at his side.

His horse's charge was slow, turgid, slewing. Perched over the press of his knees against the beast's shoulders, Toc sent arrow after arrow towards the skirmishers – though he knew it was hopeless. He could barely see, so jostled was he atop the saddle, with mud flying up on all sides as the horse careered in a wild struggle to stay upright.

As he drew closer, he heard screams. With but two arrows left, he rose higher still on his stirrups, drawing on his bowstring—

His arrows, he saw with astonishment, had not missed. Not one. Eight skirmishers were down.

He sent another hissing outward, saw it take a man in the forehead, the stone point punching through bronze and then bone.

*Last arrow.*

*Gods—*

He was suddenly among the Letherii. Driving his last arrow at near point-blank range into a woman's chest.

A spear tore into his left leg, cut through and then gouged along his horse's flank. The beast screamed, launched itself forward—

Tossing the bow away, Toc unsheathed his scimitar – *damn, should've brought a shield* – and hacked from side to side, beating away the thrusting spears.

His horse pulled through into the clear. And would have rushed on, straight into the Letherii ranks two hundred paces ahead, but Toc grasped the reins and swerved the animal round.

Only to find a dozen or so skirmishers right behind him – pursuing on foot.

Two spears drove into his mount, one skidding off a shoulder blade, the other stabbing deep into the animal's belly.

Squealing piteously, the horse foundered, then fell onto its side, hind legs already fouled with spilled out intestines, each frantic kick tearing more loose from the body cavity. Toc, with legs still drawn high, was able to throw himself from the beast, landing clear.

Skidding in the mud, struggling to regain his feet.

A spear drove into his right hip, lifting him from the muck before throwing him onto his back.

He hacked at the shaft. It splintered and the pressure pinning him down vanished.

Slashing blindly, Toc fought his way back onto his feet. There was blood pouring down both legs.

Another lunging attack. He parried the spear thrust, lurched close and chopped his scimitar into the side of the soldier's neck.

A point slammed into his back, punched him forward.

And onto a shortsword that slid up under his ribs, cutting his heart in half.

Toc Anaster sank down onto his knees, and, releasing his last breath, would have fallen forward into the mud, but for a hand grasping him, yanking him back. The flash of a knife before his lone eye. Sudden heat along the line of his jaw—

Torrent watched as the Letherii skirmisher cut away Toc Anaster's face. One more trophy. The task was quick, well-practised, and then the soldier pushed his victim away, and the red wound that had once been Toc's face plunged down into the mud.

The children were crying, and yes, he realized – in watching, in waiting, he had perhaps condemned them all to the Letherii knives. Still, they could —

Torrent turned round—
And found strangers before him.
Not Ak'rynnai.

Not D'rhasilhanii.

No, he had never before seen such people.

The clans of the White Face Barghast approached the scene of the battle – a battle nearing its grisly end. Who won, who lost, was without meaning to them. They intended to kill everyone.

Two hundred paces ahead of the ragged lines was their vanguard, walking within a stream of the Tellann Warren, which was strong in this place, where beneath the silts of the ancient shoreline could be found stone tools, harpoons made of antler, bone and ivory, and the hulks of dugout canoes. And out here, on the old seabed, there were offerings buried deep now in the silts. Polished stones, pairs of antlers locked together, animal skulls daubed in red ochre – countless gifts to a dwindling sea.

There were other reasons for such a powerful emanation of Tellann, but these were known to but one of the three in the vanguard, and she had ever been close with her secrets.

Emerging from the warren, the three had stood not far from the Awl warrior and the Awl children. They had watched, in silence, the extraordinary bravery of that lone warrior and his horse. To charge more than a score of skirmishers – the horse's skill at staying upright had been exceptional. The warrior's ability to guide the beast with but his legs, whilst loosing arrow after arrow – none of which did not find a target – was simply breathtaking.

That warrior – and his horse – had given their lives to save these last Awl, and it was that fact alone which stayed – for the moment – the hand of Tool, chosen now among all the White Face Barghast – with Humbrall Taur's tragic death at the landing – as war leader, even though he was not Barghast at all. But Imass. That he had taken as his mate Taur's daughter, Hetan, had without doubt eased the ascension to rule; but more than that, it had been owing to Tool himself.

His wisdom. His will.

The joy of life that could burn in his eyes. The fire of vengeance that could blaze in its stead – that blazed even now – when at last he had judged

the time aright, the time to answer for all that had been done.

To the Grey Swords.

An answer delivered unto the betrayers.

An answer delivered unto the slayers.

If not for that brave warrior and his brave horse, then Tool would have killed these Awl immediately. The youth with the mottled face. The muddy children huddled around him. He probably still planned to.

Hetan knew all of this, in her heart; she knew her husband. And, had he drawn his flint sword, she would not have tried to stop him.

The White Faces had been hiding for too long. Their scouting expeditions to the east had long since told them all they needed to know, of the path that awaited them, the journey they must soon undertake. It had been vengeance keeping them in place. That, and the vast, uncanny patience of Tool.

Within the Tellann Warrens, the Barghast had watched this latest war, the protracted engagement that had begun with the massing of the two armies far to the west.

They had not come in time to save the Grey Swords, but Hetan well recalled her and her husband coming upon the killing ground where the company had fallen. Indeed, they had witnessed the plains wolves engaged in their ghastly excision of human hearts – an act of honour? There was no way of knowing – each animal had fled with its prize as soon as it was able. The slaughter of those betrayed soldiers had been particularly brutal – faces had been cut away. It had been impossible to identify anyone among the fallen – and this had delivered upon Tool the deepest wound of all.

He had lost a friend there.

The betrayal.

The slaying.

There would be, in Tool, no room for mercy. Not for the Awl. Not for the Letherii army so far from home.

And now they stood, well able to see the last of the Awl warriors fall, to see their wardogs dying in the mud, to hear the triumphant roars of the Letherii, even as the nearby skirmishers, having seen the Barghast forces, were hastily retreating back to their lines.

Hetan studied that vast, churned killing field, and said, 'I cannot tell them apart.'

Torrent stared, not knowing what to think. Both women, flanking the lone man, were to his eyes terrifying. The one who had just spoken – in some infernal foreign tongue – was like an apparition from an adolescent boy's nightmare. Danger and sensuality, a bloodthirstiness that simply took Torrent's breath away – and with the loss of that breath, so too the loss of courage. Of manhood itself.

The other woman, dark, short yet lithe, wrapped in the furs of a panther. And the blue-black glint of that beast's skin seemed to be reflected in the heart of her eyes beneath that robust brow. A shaman, a witch, oh yes. A most dreadful witch.

The man was her kin – the resemblances were unmistakable in their features, as well as their modest heights and the bowing of their legs. And for all that the women terrified Torrent, the stolidity of the warrior's expression chilled the Awl's soul.

The taller woman, with her face streaked in white paint, now settled her gaze upon Torrent and said, in halting trader's tongue, 'You still live. Because of the horse warrior's sacrifice. But,' she nodded towards the savage with the flint sword, 'he remains undecided. Do you understand?'

Torrent nodded.

The man then said something, and the white-faced woman glanced away, eyes thinning. Then her gaze settled on the satchel Torrent still held, dangling from a strap, in his left hand. She pointed down at it. 'What do you carry?'

The Awl blinked, then looked down at the leather bag. Shrugging, he tossed it aside. 'Scribblings,' he said. 'He painted many words, like a

woman. But he was not the coward I thought. He was not.'

'Scribblings?'

Torrent found that there were tears on his cheeks. He wiped them away. 'The horse-warrior,' he said. 'The Mezla.'

Hetan saw her husband's head slowly turn at that word, saw his eyes fix on the Awl warrior, then watched as a cascade of realizations took hold of Tool's expression, ending with a terrible scream as he brought his hands to his face, then fell to his knees.

And she was suddenly at his side, cradling his head against her belly as he loosed another piercing cry, clawing at his own face.

The Awl stared as if in shock.

Barghast warriors were rushing out from the line behind them, the young ones with their ancient single-edged hook-swords drawn, Tool's most beloved whom he saw as his own children. Faces filled with consternation, with fear, they converged towards Tool.

Hetan held out a hand, halted them all in their tracks.

Beside the two of them now, drawing her panther skin about her shoulders, Kilava Onass. Her husband's sister, whose heart held more sorrow and loss than Hetan could comprehend, who would weep every night as if it was ritually demanded of her with the sun's setting. Who would walk out beyond the camp and sing wordless songs to the night sky – songs that would send the ay howling with voices of mourning and grief.

She stood, now, on her brother's right. But did not reach down a hand, did not even cast upon Tool a glance of sympathy. Instead, her dark eyes were scanning the Letherii army. 'They prepare for us,' she said. 'The Tiste Edur join the ranks. The cavalry wait along the old shoreline. Onos Toolan, we are wasting time. You know I must leave soon. Very soon.'

Tool drew himself from Hetan's embrace. Saying nothing, he straightened, then began walking.

To where his friend had fallen.

The Awl warrior took a half-step towards him. 'No!' he shouted, turning pleading eyes upon Hetan. 'He must not! The Mezla – he was a friend, yes? Please, he must not!'

Tool walked on.

*'Please! They cut off his face! '*

Hetan flinched. 'He knows,' she said.

And then Tool did halt, looking back, meeting Hetan's eyes. 'My love,' he said in a ragged voice. 'I do not understand.'

She could but shake her head.

'They betrayed him,' Tool continued. 'Yet, see. This day. He rode to the enemy.'

'To save the lives of these children,' Hetan said. 'Yes.'

'I do not understand.'

'You have told me many tales, husband, of your friend. Of Toc the Younger. Of the honour within him. I ask you this: how could he not?'

Her heart came near to bursting as she gazed upon her beloved. These Imass – they were unable to hide anything they felt. They possessed none of the masks, the disguises, that were the bitter gifts of others, including her own Barghast. And they were without control, without mastery, which left grieving to wound the soul deeper than anything Hetan could imagine. *As with grieving, so too love. So too friendship. So too, alas, loyalty.*

'They live,' Tool then said.

She nodded.

Her husband turned and resumed his dreadful journey.

A snort of impatience from Kilava.

Hetan walked over to the leather satchel the Awl warrior had discarded. She picked it up, slung it over one shoulder. 'Kilava,' she said. 'Bonecaster. Lead our Barghast into this battle. I go down to my husband.'

'They will not—'

'Don't be absurd. Terror alone will ensure their obedience. Besides, the sooner they are done slaughtering, the sooner you will part our company.'

Her sudden smile revealed a panther's canines.

Sending a chill through Hetan. *Thank the spirits you smile so rarely, Kilava.*

Atri-Preda Bivatt had commanded her forces to withdraw from the seabed. Back onto more solid ground. Their triumph this day had grown sour with the taste of fear. Another damned army, and it was clear that they intended to do battle against her exhausted, bruised and battered forces. She had allowed herself but a few moments' silent raging at the injustice, before forcing upon herself the responsibilities of her command.

They would fight with courage and honour, although as the barbaric enemy continued massing she could see that it would be hopeless. Seventy thousand, perhaps more. The ones who landed on the north coast, but also, perhaps, the rumoured allies of the Bolkando. Returned here to the north – but why? To join with the Awl? But for that, their main army had come too late. Bivatt had done what she had set out to do; had done what had been commanded of her. She had exterminated the Awl.

Seventy thousand or two hundred thousand. The destruction of Bivatt and her army. Neither mattered in the greater scheme of things. The Letherii Empire would throw back these new invaders. Failing that, they would bribe them away from the Bolkando; indeed, turn them round to fashion an alliance that would sweep into the border kingdoms in waves of brutal slaughter.

Perhaps, she suddenly realized, there was a way through this . . . She glanced about until she saw one of her Finadds. Walked over. 'Prepare a delegation, Finadd. We will seek parley with this new enemy.'

'Yes sir.' The man rushed off.

'Atri-Preda!'

Bivatt turned to see Brohl Handar approach. The Overseer did not, at this moment, look like an imperial governor. He was covered in gore, gripping his sword in one hand thick with dried blood.

'It seems we are not too late after all,' he said.

'These are not Awl, Overseer.'

'I see that clearly enough. I see also, Atri-Preda, that you and I will die here today.' He paused, then grunted a laugh. 'Do you recall, Bivatt, warning me that Letur Anict sought to kill me? Yet here I have marched with you and your army, all this way—'

'Overseer,' she cut in. 'The Factor infiltrated my forces with ten assassins. All of whom are dead.'

His eyes slowly widened.

Bivatt continued, 'Have you seen the tall soldier often at your side? I set him the task of keeping you alive, and he has done all that I commanded. Unfortunately, Overseer, I believe that he shall soon fail at it.' *Unless I can negotiate our way out of this.*

She faced the advancing enemy once more. They were now raising standards. Only a few, and identical to each other. Bivatt squinted in the afternoon light.

And recognized those standards.

She went cold inside. 'Too bad,' she said.

'Atri-Preda?'

'I recognize those standards, Overseer. There will be no parley. Nor any chance of surrender.'

'Those warriors,' Brohl Handar said after a moment, 'are the ones who have been raising the cairns.'

'Yes.'

'They have been with us, then, for some time.'

'Their scouts at the least, Overseer. Longer than you think.'

'Atri-Preda.'

She faced him, studied his grave expression. 'Overseer?'

'Die well, Bivatt.'

'I intend to. And you. Die well, Brohl Handar.'

Brohl walked away from her then, threading through a line of soldiers, his eyes fixed on one in particular. Tall, with a gentle face streaked now in mud.

The Tiste Edur caught the man's gaze, and answered the easy smile with one of his own.

'Overseer, I see you have had an exciting day.'

'I see the same on you,' Brohl replied, 'and it seems there is more to come.'

'Yes, but I tell you this, I am pleased enough. For once, there is solid ground beneath me.'

The Overseer thought to simply thank the soldier, for keeping him alive this long. Instead, he said nothing for a long moment.

The soldier rubbed at his face, then said, 'Sir, your Arapay await you, no doubt. See, the enemy readies itself.'

And yes, this is what Brohl Handar wanted. 'My Arapay will fight well enough without me, Letherii. I would ask one final boon of you.'

'Then ask, sir.'

'I would ask for the privilege of fighting at your side. Until we fall.'

The man's soft eyes widened slightly, then all at once the smile returned. 'Choose, then, Overseer. Upon my right or upon my left.'

Brohl Handar chose the man's left. As for guarding his own unprotected flank, he was indifferent.

Somehow, the truth of that pleased him.

In the city of Drene at this time, riots raged over the entire north half of the city, and with the coming night the mayhem would spread into the more opulent south districts.

Venitt Sathad, granted immediate audience with Factor Letur Anict – who awaited him standing before his desk, his round, pale face glistening with sweat, and in whose eyes the steward saw, as he walked towards the man, a kind of bemusement at war with deeper stresses – walked forward, in neither haste nor swagger. Rather, a walk of singular purpose.

He saw Letur Anict blink suddenly, a rapid reassessment, even as he continued right up to the man.

And drove a knife into the Factor's left eye, deep into the brain.

The weight of Letur Anict, as he collapsed, pulled the weapon free.

Venitt Sathad bent to clean the blade off on the Factor's silk robe; then he straightened, turned for the door, and departed.

Letur Anict had a wife. He had children. He'd had guards, but Orbyn Truthfinder had taken care of them.

Venitt Sathad set out to eliminate all heirs.

He no longer acted as an agent of the Liberty Consign. Now, at this moment, he was an Indebted.

Who had had enough.

Hetan left her husband kneeling beside the body of Toc the Younger. She could do no more for him, and this was not a failing on her part. The raw grief of an Imass was like a bottomless well, one that could snatch the unsuspecting and send them plummeting down into unending darkness.

Once, long ago now, Tool had stood before his friend, and his friend had not known him, and for the Imass – mortal once more, after thousands upon thousands of years – this had been the source of wry amusement, in the manner of a trickster's game where the final pleasure but awaited revelation of the truth.

Tool, in his unhuman patience, had waited a long time to unveil that revelation. Too long, now. His friend had died, unknowing. The trickster's game had delivered a wound from which, she suspected, her husband might never recover.

And so, she now knew in her heart, there might be other losses on this tragic day. A wife losing her husband. Two daughters losing their adopted father, and one son his true father.

She walked to where Kilava Onass had stationed herself to watch the battle, and it was no small mercy that she had elected not to veer into her Soletaken form, that, indeed, she had left the clans of the White Face Barghast the freedom to do what they did best: kill in a frenzy of explosive savagery.

Hetan saw that Kilava stood near where a lone rider had fallen – killed by the weapons of the K'Chain Che'Malle, she noted. A typically vicious slaying, stirring in her memories of the time when she herself had stood before such terrible creatures, a memory punctuated with the sharp pang of grief for a brother who had fallen that day.

Kilava was ignoring the legless, one-armed body lying ten paces to her left. Hetan's gaze settled upon it in sudden curiosity.

'Sister,' she said to Kilava – deliberate in her usage of the one title that Kilava most disliked – 'see how this one wears a mask. Was not the war leader of the Awl so masked?'

'I imagine so,' Kilava said, 'since he was named Redmask.'

'Well,' Hetan said, walking to the corpse, 'this one is wearing the garb of an Awl.'

'But he was slain by the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'Yes, I see that. Even so . . .' She crouched down, studied that peculiar mask, the strange, minute scales beneath the spatters of mud. 'This mask, Kilava, it is the hide of a K'Chain, I would swear it, although the scales are rather tiny—'

'Matron's throat,' Kilava replied.

Hetan glanced over. 'Truly?' Then she reached down and tugged the mask away from the man's face. A long look down into those pale features.

Hetan rose, tossing the mask to one side. 'You were right, it's not Redmask.'

Kilava asked, 'How do you know that?'

'Well, Awl garb or not, this man was Letherii.'

Hood, High King of Death, Collector of the Fallen, the undemanding master of more souls than he could count – even had he been so inclined, which he was not – stood over the body, waiting.

Such particular attention was, thankfully, a rare occurrence. But some deaths arrived, every now and then, bearing certain . . . eccentricities. And the one lying below was one such arrival.

Not least because the Wolves wanted his soul, yet would not get it, but also because this mortal had evaded Hood's grasp again and again, even though any would see and understand well the sweet gift the Lord of Death had been offering.

Singular lives, yes, could be most . . . singular.

Witness that of the one who had arrived a short time earlier. There were no gifts in possessing a simple mind. There was no haze of calming incomprehension to salve the terrible wounds of a life that had been ordained to remain, until the very end, profoundly innocent.

Hood had not begrudged the blood on Beak's hands. He had, however, most succinctly begrudged the heartless actions of Beak's mother and father.

Few mortal priests understood the necessity for redress, although they often spouted the notion in their sermons of guilt, with their implicit extortions that did little more than swell the temple coffers.

Redress, then, was a demand that even a god could not deny. And so it had been with the one named Beak.

And so it was, now, with the one named Toc the Younger.

'Awaken,' Hood said. 'Arise.'

And Toc the Younger, with a long sigh, did as Hood commanded.

Standing, tottering, squinting now at the gate awaiting them both. 'Damn,' Toc muttered, 'but that's a poor excuse for a gate.'

'The dead see as they see, Toc the Younger. Not long ago, it shone white with purity.'

'My heart goes out to that poor, misguided soul.'

'Of course it does. Come. Walk with me.'

They set out towards that gate.

'You do this for every soul?'

'I do not.'

'Oh.' And then Toc halted – or tried to, but his feet dragged onward – 'Hold on, my soul was sworn to the Wolves—'

'Too late. Your soul, Toc the Younger, was sworn to me. Long ago.'

'Really? Who was the fool who did that?'

'Your father,' Hood replied. 'Who, unlike Dassem Ultor, remained loyal.'

'Which you rewarded by killing him? You bastard piece of pigsh—'

'You will await him, Toc the Younger.'

'He lives still?'

'Death never lies.'

Toc the Younger tried to halt again. 'Hood, a question – please.'

The god stopped, looked down at the mortal.

'Hood, why do I still have only one eye?'

The God of Death, Reaper of Souls, made no reply. He had been wondering that himself.

*Damned wolves.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I have seen the face of sorrow
She looks away in the distance
Across all these bridges
From whence I came
And those spans, trussed and arched
Hold up our lives as we go back again
To how we thought then
To how we thought we thought then
I have seen sorrow's face,
But she is ever turned away
And her words leave me blind
Her eyes make me mute
I do not understand what she says to me
I do not know if to obey
Or attempt a flood of tears
I have seen her face
She does not speak
She does not weep
She does not know me
For I am but a stone fitted in place
On the bridge where she walks

*Lay of the Bridgeburners*
Toc the Younger

Once, long ago, Onrack the broken committed a crime. He had professed his love for a woman in fashioning her likeness on the wall of a cave. There had been such talent in his hands, in his eyes, he had bound two souls into that stone. His own . . . that was his right, his choice. But the other soul, oh, the selfishness of that act, the cruelty of that theft . . .

He stood, now, before another wall of stone, within another cave, looking upon the array of paintings, the beasts with every line of muscle, every hint of motion, celebrating their veracity, the accuracy of genius. And in the midst of these great creatures of the world beyond, awkward stick figures, representing the Imass, cavorted in a poor mime of dance. Lifeless as the law demanded. He stood, then, still Broken, still the stealer of a woman's life.

In the darkness of his captivity, long ago, someone had come to him, with gentle hands and yielding flesh. He so wanted to believe that it had been she, the one whose soul he had stolen. But such knowledge was now lost to him; so confused had the memory become, so infused with all that his heart wished to believe.

And, even if it had indeed been she, well, perhaps she had no choice. Imprisoned by his crime, helpless to defy his desire. In his own breaking, he had destroyed her as well.

He reached out, settled fingertips lightly upon one of the images. Ranag, pursued by an ay. In the torch's wavering light both beasts seemed in motion, muscles rippling. In celebrating the world, which held no regrets, the Imass would gather shoulder to shoulder in this cavern, and with their voices they would beat out the rhythm of breaths, the *huffing* of the beasts; while others, positioned in selected concavities, pounded their hands on drums of hollowed-out wood and skin, until the echoes of hoofbeats thundered from all sides.

*We are the witnesses. We are the eyes trapped for ever on the outside. We have been severed from the world. And this is at the heart of the law, the prohibition. We create ourselves as lifeless, awkward, apart. Once, we were as the beasts, and there was no inside, no outside. There was only the one, the one world, of which we were its flesh, its bone, flesh little different from grasses, lichens and trees. Bones little different from wood and stone. We were its blood, in which coursed rivers down to the lakes and seas.*

*We give voice to our sorrow, to our loss.*

*In discovering what it is to die, we have been cast out from the world.*

*In discovering beauty, we were made ugly.*

*We do not suffer in the manner that beasts suffer – for they surely do. We suffer with the memory of how it was before suffering came, and this deepens the wound, this tears open the pain. There is no beast that can match our anguish.*

*So sing, brothers. Sing, sisters. And in the torch's light, floating free from the walls of our minds – of the caves within us – see all the faces of sorrow. See those who have died and left us. And sing your grief until the very beasts flee.*

Onrack the Broken felt the tears on his cheeks, and cursed himself for a sentimental fool.

Behind him, Trull Sengar stood in silence. In humouring a foolish Imass, he was without impatience. Onrack knew he would simply wait, and wait. Until such time as Onrack might stir from his grim memories, recalling once more the gifts of the present. He would—

'There was great skill in the painting of these beasts.'

The Imass, still facing the stone wall, still with his back to the Tiste Edur, found himself smiling. *So, even here and now, I indulge silly fantasies that are, even if comforting, without much meaning.* 'Yes, Trull Sengar. True talent. Such skill is passed down in the blood, and with each generation there is the potential for . . . burgeoning. Into such as we see here.'

'Is the artist among the clans here? Or were these painted long ago, by someone else?'

'The artist,' Onrack said, 'is Ulshun Pral.'

'And is it this talent that has earned him the right to rule?'

*No. Never that.* 'This talent,' the Imass replied, 'is his weakness.'

'Better than you, Onrack?'

He turned about, his smile now wry. 'I see some flaws. I see hints of impatience. Of emotion free and savage as the beasts he paints. I see also,

perhaps, signs of a talent he had lost and has not yet rediscovered.'

'How does one lose talent like that?'

'By dying, only to return.'

'Onrack,' and there was a new tone to Trull's voice, a gravity that unnerved Onrack, 'I have spoken with these Imass here. Many of them. With Ulshun himself. And I do not think they ever died. I do not think they were once T'lan, only to have forgotten in the countless generations of existence here.'

'Yes, they say they are among those who did not join the Ritual. But this cannot be true, Trull Sengar. They must be ghosts, willed into flesh, held here by the timelessness of the Gate at the end of this cave. My friend, they do not know themselves.' And then he paused. *Can this be true?*

'Ulshun Pral says he remembers his mother. He says she is still alive. Although not here right now.'

'Ulshun Pral is a hundred thousand years old, Trull Sengar. Or more. What he remembers is false, a delusion.'

'I do not believe that, not any more. I think the mystery here is deeper than any of us realize.'

'Let us go on,' Onrack said. 'I would see this Gate.'

They left the chamber of the beasts.

Trull was filled with unease. Something had been awakened in his friend – by the paintings – and its taste was bitter. He had seen, in the lines of Onrack's back, his shoulders, a kind of slow collapse. The return of some ancient burden. And, seeing this, Trull had forced himself to speak, to break the silence before Onrack could destroy himself.

*Yes. The paintings. The crime. Will you not smile again, Onrack? Not the smile you gave me when you turned to face me just now – too broken, too filled with sorrow – but the smile I have grown to treasure since coming to this realm.*

'Onrack.'

'Yes?'

'Do we still know what we are waiting for? Yes, threats approach. Will they come through the Gate? Or from across the hills beyond the camp? Do we know in truth if these Imass are indeed threatened?'

'Prepare yourself, Trull Sengar. Danger draws close . . . on all sides.'

'Perhaps then we should return to Ulshun Pral.'

'Rud Elalle is with them. There is time yet . . . to see this Gate.'

Moments later, they came to the edge of the vast, seemingly limitless cavern, and both halted.

Not one Gate. *Many gates.*

And all were seething with silent, wild fire.

'Onrack,' Trull said, unslinging his spear. 'Best return to Rud Elalle and let him know – this is not what he described.'

Onrack pointed towards a central heap of stones. 'She has failed. This realm, Trull Sengar, is dying. And when it dies . . .'

Neither spoke for a moment.

Then Onrack said, 'I will return quickly, my friend, so that you do not stand alone – against what may come through.'

'I look forward to your company,' Trull replied. 'So . . . hurry.'

Forty-odd paces beyond the camp rose a modest hill, stretched out as if it had once been an atoll, assuming the plains had once been under water and that, Hedge told himself as he kicked his way through a ribbon of sand studded with broken shells, was a fair assumption. Reaching the elongated summit, he set down his oversized crossbow near an outcrop of sun-bleached limestone, then walked over to where Quick Ben sat cross-legged, facing the hills two thousand paces to the south.

'You're not meditating or something, are you?'

'If I had been,' the wizard snapped, 'you'd have just ruined it and possibly killed us all.'

'It's all the posturing, Quick,' Hedge said, flopping down onto the gravel beside him. 'You turn picking your nose into a Hood-damned ritual, so it gets I just give up on knowing when to talk to you or not.'

'If that's the case, then don't ever talk to me and we'll both be happy.'

'Miserable snake.'

'Hairless rodent.'

The two sat in companionable silence for a time, then Hedge reached out and picked up a shard of dark brown flint. He peered at one serrated edge.

'What are you doing?' Quick Ben demanded.

'Contemplating.'

'Contemplating,' Quick Ben mimed, head wagging from side to side in time with each syllable.

'I could cut your throat with this. One swipe.'

'We never did get along, did we? Gods, I can't believe how we hugged and slapped each other on the back, down at that river—'

'Stream.'

'Watering hole.'

'Spring.'

'Will you please cut my throat now, Hedge?'

The sapper tossed the flint away and dusted his hands with brisk slaps. 'What makes you so sure the baddies are coming up from the south?'

'Who says I'm sure of anything?'

'So we could be sitting in the wrong place. Facing the wrong direction. Maybe everybody's getting butchered right now even as I speak.'

'Well, Hedge, if you hadn't of interrupted my meditating, maybe I'd have figured out where we should be right now!'

'Oh, nice one, wizard.'

'They're coming from the south because it's the best approach.'

'As what, rabbits?'

'No, as dragons, Hedge.'

The sapper squinted at the wizard. 'There always was a smell of Soletaken about you, Quick. We finally gonna see what scrawny beastie you got hiding in there?'

'That's a rather appalling way of putting it, Hedge. And the answer is: no.'

'You still feeling shaky?'

The wizard glanced over, his eyes bright and half mad – his normal look, in other words. 'No. In fact, the very opposite.'

'How so?'

'I stretched myself, way more than I'd ever done before.

It's made me . . . nastier.'

'Really.'

'Don't sound so impressed, Hedge.'

'All I know is,' the sapper said, grunting to his feet, 'when they roll over you, there's just me and an endless supply of cussers. And that suits me just fine.'

'Don't blast my body to pieces, Hedge.'

'Even if you're already dead?'

'Especially then, because I won't be, will I? You'll just think it, because thinking it is convenient, because then you can go wild with your damned cussers until you're standing in a Hood-damned crater *a Hood-damned league across*!'

This last bit had been more or less a shriek.

Hedge continued his squinting. 'No reason to get all testy,' he said in a hurt tone, then turned and walked back to his crossbow, his beloved lobber. And said under his breath, 'Oh, this is going to be so much fun, I can't wait!'

'Hedge!'

'What?'

'Someone's coming.'

'From where?' the sapper demanded, readying a cusser in the cradle of the crossbow.

'Ha ha. From the south, you bloated bladder of piss.'

'I knew it,' Hedge said, coming to the wizard's side.

She had chosen to remain as she was, rather than veer into her Soletaken form. That would come later. And so she walked across the plain, through the high grasses of the basin. On a ridge directly ahead stood two figures. One was a ghost, but maybe something more than just a ghost. The other was a mage, and without question more than just a mage.

A sliver of disquiet stirred Menandore's thoughts. Quickly swept away. If Rud Elalle had selected these two as allies, then she would accept that. Just as he had recruited the Tiste Edur and the one known as Onrack the Broken. All . . . complications, but she would not be alone in dealing with them, would she?

The two men watched as she ascended the gentle slope. One was cradling a bizarre crossbow of some kind. The other was playing with a handful of small polished stones, as if trying to choose one as his favourite.

*They're fools. Idiots.*

*And soon, they will both be dust.*

She fixed on them her hardest glare as she drew up to the edge of the crest. 'You two are pathetic. Why stand here – do you know who

approaches? Do you know they will come from the south? Meaning that you two will be the first they see. And so, the first they kill.'

The taller, darker-skinned one turned slightly, then said, 'Here comes your son, Menandore. With Ulshun Pral.' He then frowned. 'That's a familiar walk . . . Wonder why I never noticed that before.'

*Walk? Familiar walk? He is truly mad.*

'I have summoned them,' she said, crossing her arms. 'We must prepare for the battle.'

The shorter one grunted, then said, 'We don't want any company. So pick somewhere else to do your fighting.'

'I am tempted to crush your skull between my hands,' Menandore said.

'Doesn't work,' the wizard muttered. 'Everything just pops back out.'

The one with the crossbow gave her a wide smile.

Menandore said, 'I assure you, I have no intention of being anywhere near you, although it is my hope I will be within range to see your grisly deaths.'

'What makes you so sure they'll be grisly?' the wizard asked, now studying one pebble in particular, holding it up to the light as if it was a gem of some sort, but Menandore could see that it was not a gem. Simply a stone, and an opaque one at that.

'What are you doing?' she demanded.

He glanced across at her, then closed his hand round the stone and brought it down behind his back. 'Nothing. Why? Anyway, I asked you a question.'

'And I am obliged to answer it?' She snorted.

Rud Elalle and Ulshun Pral arrived, halting a few paces behind the wizard and his companion.

Menandore saw the hard expression in her son's face. *Could I have seen anything else? No. Not for this.* 'Beloved son—'

'I care nothing for the Finnest,' Rud Elalle said. 'I will not join you in your fight, Mother.'

She stared, eyes widening even as they filled with burning rage. 'You must! I cannot face them both!'

'You have new allies,' Rud Elalle said. 'These two, who even now guard the approach—'

'These brainless dolts? My son, you send me to my death!'

Rud Elalle straightened. 'I am taking my Imass away from here, Mother. They are all that matters to me—'

'More than the life of your mother?'

'More than the fight she chooses for herself!' he snapped. 'This clash – this feud – it is not mine. It is yours. It was *ever* yours! I want nothing to do with it!'

Menandore flinched back at her son's fury. Sought to hold his eyes, then failed and looked away. 'So be it,' she whispered. 'Go then, my son, and take your chosen kin. Go!'

As Rud Elalle nodded and turned away, however, she spoke again, in a tone harder than anything that had come before. '*But not him*.'

Her son swung round, saw his mother pointing towards the Imass at his side.

Ulshun Pral.

Rud Elalle frowned. 'What? I do not—'

'No, my son, *you do not*. Ulshun Pral must remain. Here.'

'I will not permit—'

And then the Bentract leader reached out a hand to stay Rud Elalle – who was moments from veering into his dragon form, to lock in battle with his own mother.

Menandore waited, outwardly calm, reposed, even as her heart thudded fierce in her chest.

'She speaks true,' Ulshun Pral said. 'I must stay.'

'But why?'

'For the secret I possess, Rud Elalle. The secret they all seek. If I go with you, all will pursue. Do you understand? Now, I beg you, lead my people away from here, to a safe place. Lead them away, Rud Elalle, and quickly!'

'Will you now fight at my side, my son?' Menandore demanded. 'To ensure the life of Ulshun Pral?'

But Ulshun Pral was already pushing Rud Elalle away. 'Do as I ask,' he said to Menandore's son. 'I cannot die fearing for my people – please, *lead them away*.'

The wizard then spoke up, 'We'll do our best to safeguard him, Rud Elalle.'

Menandore snorted her contempt. 'You risk such a thing?' she demanded of her son.

Rud Elalle stared across at the wizard, then at the smiling one with the crossbow, and she saw a strange calm slip over her son's expression – and that sliver of disquiet returned to her, stinging.

'I shall,' Rud Elalle then said, and he reached out to Ulshun Pral. A gentle gesture, a hand resting lightly against one side of the Imass's face. Rud Elalle then stepped back, swung round, and set off back for the camp.

Menandore spun on the two remaining men. 'You damned fools!'

'Just for that,' the wizard said, 'I'm not giving you my favourite stone.'

Hedge and Quick Ben watched her march back down the slope.

'That was odd,' the sapper muttered.

'Wasn't it.'

They were silent for another hundred heartbeats, then Hedge turned to Quick Ben. 'So what do you think?'

'You know exactly what I'm thinking, Hedge.'

'Same as me, then.'

'The same.'

'Tell me something, Quick.'

'What?'

'Was that really your favourite stone?'

'Do you mean the one I had in my hand? Or the one I slipped into her fancy white cloak?'

With skin wrinkled and stained by millennia buried in peat, Sheltatha Lore did indeed present an iconic figure of dusk. In keeping now with her reddish hair and the murky hue of her eyes, she wore a cloak of deep burgundy, black leather leggings and boots. Bronze-studded vest drawn tight across her chest.

At her side – like Sheltatha facing the hills – stood Sukul Ankhadu, Dapple, the mottling of her skin visible on her bared hands and forearms. On her slim shoulders a Letherii night-cloak, as was worn now by the noble born and the women of the Tiste Edur in the empire, although this one was somewhat worse for wear.

'Soon,' said Sheltatha Lore, 'this realm shall be dust.'

'This pleases you, sister?'

'Perhaps not as much as it pleases you, Sukul. Why is this place an abomination in your eyes?'

'I have no love for Imass. Imagine, a people grubbing in the dirt of caves for hundreds of thousands of years. Building nothing. All history trapped as memory, twisted as tales sung in rhyme every night. They are flawed. In their souls, there must be a flaw, a failing. And these ones here, they have deluded themselves into believing that they actually exist.'

'Not all of them, Sukul.'

Dapple waved dismissively. 'The greatest failing here, Sheltatha, lies with the Lord of Death. If not for Hood's indifference, this realm could never have lasted as long as it has. It irritates me, such carelessness.'

'So,' Sheltatha Lore said with a smile, 'you will hasten the demise of these Imass, even though, with the realm dying anyway, they are already doomed.'

'You do not understand. The situation has . . . changed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Their conceit,' said Sukul, 'has made them real. Mortal, now. Blood, flesh and bone. Capable of bleeding, of dying. Yet they remain ignorant of their world's imminent extinction.

My slaughtering them, sister, will be an act of mercy.'

Sheltatha Lore grunted. 'I cannot wait to hear them thank you.'

At that moment a gold and white dragon rose into view before them, sailing low over the crests of the hills.

Sukul Ankhadu sighed. 'It begins.'

The Soletaken glided down the slope directly towards them. Looming huge, yet still fifty paces away, the dragon tilted its wings back, crooked them as its hind limbs reached downwards, then settled onto the ground.

A blurring swirl enveloped the beast, and a moment later Menandore walked out from that spice-laden disturbance.

Sheltatha Lore and Sukul Ankhadu waited, saying nothing, their faces expressionless, while Menandore approached, finally halting five paces from them, her blazing eyes moving from one sister to the other, then back again. She said, 'Are we still agreed, then?'

'Such glorious precedent, this moment,' Sheltatha Lore observed.

Menandore frowned. 'Necessity. At least we should be understood on that matter. I cannot stand alone, cannot guard the soul of Scabandari. The Finnest must not fall in his hands.'

A slight catch of breath from Sukul. 'Is he near, then?'

'Oh yes. I have stolen the eyes of one travelling with him. Again and again. They even now draw to the last gate, and look upon its wound, and stand before the torn corpse of that foolish Imass Bonecaster who thought she could seal it with her own soul.' Menandore sneered. 'Imagine such effrontery. Starvald Demelain! The very chambers of K'rul's heart! Did she not know how that weakened him? Weakened *everything*?'

'So we three kill Silchas Ruin,' Sheltatha Lore said. 'And then the Imass.'

'My son chooses to oppose us in that last detail,' Menandore said. 'But the Imass have outlived their usefulness. We shall wound Rud if we must, but we do not kill him. Understood? I will have your word on this. Again. Here and now, sisters.'

'Agreed,' Sheltatha Lore said.

'Yes,' said Sukul Ankhadu, 'although it will make matters more difficult.'

'We must live with that,' Menandore said, and then turned. 'It is time.'

'Already?'

'A few pathetic mortals seek to stand in our way – we must crush them first. And Silchas Ruin has allies. Our day's work begins now, sisters.'

With that she walked towards the hills, and began veering into her dragon form.

Behind her, Sheltatha Lore and Sukul Ankhadu exchanged a look, and then they moved apart, giving themselves the room they needed.

Veering into dragons.

Dawn, Dusk and the one known as Dapple. A dragon of gold and white. One stained brown and looking half-rotted. The last mottled, neither light nor dark, but the uneasy interplay between the two. Soletaken with the

blood of Tiam, the Mother. Sail-winged and serpent-necked, taloned and scaled, the blood of *Eleint*.

Lifting into the air on gusts of raw sorcery. Menandore leading the wedge formation. Sheltatha Lore on her left. Sukul Ankhadu on her right.

The hills before them, now dropping away as they heaved their massive bulks yet higher.

Clearing the crests, the ancient ridge of an ancient shore, and the sun caught gleaming scales, bloomed through the membranes of wings, while beneath three shadows raced over grass and rock, shadows that sent small mammals scurrying for cover, that launched birds into screeching flight, that made hares freeze in their tracks.

Beasts in the sky were hunting, and nothing on the ground was safe.

A flat landscape studded with humped mounds – dead dragons, ghastly as broken barrows, from which bones jutted, webbed by desiccated skin and sinew. Wings snapped like the wreckage of foundered ships. Necks twisted on the ground, heads from which the skin had contracted, pulled back to reveal gaunt hollows in the eye sockets and beneath the cheekbones. Fangs coated in grey dust were bared as if in eternal defiance.

Seren Pedac had not believed there had once been so many dragons. Had not, in truth, believed that the creatures even existed, barring those who could create such a form from their own bodies, like Silchas Ruin. Were these, she had first wondered, all Soletaken? For some reason, she knew the answer to be *no*.

True dragons, of which Silchas Ruin, in his dread winged shape, was but a mockery. Devoid of majesty, of purity.

The shattering of bones and wings had come from age, not violence. None of these beasts were sprawled out in death. None revealed gaping wounds. They had each settled into their final postures.

*'Like blue flies on the sill of a window,'* Udinaas had said. *'Wrong side, trying to get out. But the window stayed closed. To them, maybe to*

*everyone, every thing. Or . . . maybe not every thing.'* And then he had smiled, as if the thought had amused him.

They had seen the gate that was clearly their destination from a great distance away, and indeed it seemed the dragon mounds were more numerous the closer they came, crowding in on all sides. The flanks of that arch were high as towers, thin to the point of skeletal, while the arch itself seemed twisted, like a vast cobweb wrapped around a dead branch. Enclosed by this structure was a wall smooth and grey, yet vaguely swirling widdershins – the way through, to another world. Where, it was now understood by all, would be found the remnant soul of Scabandari, Father Shadow, the Betrayer. *Bloodeye*.

The lifeless air tasted foul to Seren Pedac, as if immeasurable grief tainted every breath drawn in this realm, a bleak redolence that would not fade even after countless millennia. It sickened her, sapped the strength from her limbs, from her very spirit. Daunting as that portal was, she longed to claw through the grey, formless barrier. Longed for an end to this. All of it.

There was a way, she was convinced – there *had* to be a way – of negotiating through the confrontation fast approaching. Was this not her sole talent, the singular skill she would permit herself to acknowledge? Three strides ahead of her, Udinaas and Kettle walked, her tiny hand nestled in his much larger, much more battered one. The sight – which had preceded her virtually since their arrival in this grim place – was yet another source of anguish and unease. Was he alone capable of setting aside all his nightmares, to comfort this lone, lost child?

Long ago, at the very beginning of this journey, Kettle had held herself close to Silchas Ruin. For he had been the one who had spoken to her through the dying Azath. And he had made vows to protect her and the burgeoning life that had come to her. And so she had looked upon her benefactor with all the adoration one might expect of a foundling in such a circumstance.

This was no longer true. Oh, Seren Pedac saw enough small gestures to underscore that old allegiance, the threads linking these two so-different beings – their shared place of birth, the precious mutual recognition that

was solitude, estrangement from all others. But Silchas Ruin had . . . revealed more of himself. Had revealed, in his cold disregard, a brutality that could take one's breath away. *Oh, and how different is that from Kettle's tales of murdering people in Letheras? Of draining their blood, feeding their corpses into the hungry, needy grounds of the Azath?* Still, Kettle expressed none of those desires any more. In returning to life, she had abandoned her old ways, had become, with each passing day, more and more simply a young girl. An orphan.

Witness, again and again, to her adopted family's endless quarrelling and bickering. To the undeniable threats, the promises of murder. *Yes, this is what we have offered her.*

*And Silchas Ruin is hardly above all of that, is he?*

But what of Udinaas? Revealing no great talent, no terrible power. Revealing, in truth, naught but a profound vulnerability.

*Ah, and this is what draws her to him. What he gifts back to her in that clasping of hands, the soft smile that reaches even his sad eyes.*

Udinaas, Seren Pedac realized with a shock, was the only truly likeable member of their party.

She could in no way include herself as one with even the potential for genuine feelings of warmth from any of the others, not since her rape of Udinaas's mind. But even before then, she had revealed her paucity of skills in the area of camaraderie. Ever brooding, prone to despondency – these were the legacies of all she had done – and not done – in her life.

Kicking through dust, with Clip and Silchas Ruin well ahead of the others, with the massive humps of dead dragons on all sides, they drew yet closer to that towering gate. Fear Sengar, who had been walking two strides behind her on her left, now came alongside. His hand was on the grip of his sword.

'Do not be a fool,' she hissed at him.

His face was set in stern lines, lips tight.

Ahead, Clip and Silchas reached the gate and there they halted. Both seemed to be looking down at a vague, smallish form on the ground.

Udinaas slowed as the child whose hand he was holding began pulling back. Seren Pedac saw him look down and say something in a very low tone.

If Kettle replied it was in a whisper.

The ex-slave nodded then, and a moment later they carried on, Kettle keeping pace without any seeming reluctance.

What had made her shrink away?

What had he said to so easily draw her onward once more?

They came closer, and Seren Pedac heard a low sigh from Fear Sengar. 'They look upon a body,' he said.

*Oh, Errant protect us.*

'Acquitor,' continued the Tiste Edur, so low that only she could hear.

'Yes?'

'I must know . . . how you will choose.'

'I don't intend to,' she snapped in sudden irritation. 'Do we come all this way together only to kill each other now?'

He grunted in wry amusement. 'Are we that evenly matched?'

'Then, if it is truly hopeless, why attempt anything at all?'

'Have I come this far only to step away, then? Acquitor, I must do what I must. Will you stand with me?'

They had halted, well back from the others, all of whom were now gathered around that corpse. Seren Pedac unstrapped her helm and pulled it off, then clawed at her greasy hair.

'Acquitor,' Fear persisted, 'you have shown power – you are no longer the weakest among us. What you choose may prove the difference between our

living and dying.'

'Fear, what is it you seek with the soul of Scabandari?'

'Redemption,' he answered immediately. 'For the Tiste Edur.'

'And how do you imagine Scabandari's broken, tattered soul will grant you such redemption?'

'I will awaken it, Acquitor – and together we will purge Kurald Emurlahn. We will drive out the poison that afflicts us. And we will, perhaps, shatter my brother's cursed sword.'

*Too vague, you damned fool. Even if you awaken Scabandari, might he not in turn be enslaved by that poison, and its promise of power? And what of his own desires, hungers – what of the vengeance he himself will seek?*
'Fear,' she said in sudden, near-crippling weariness, 'your dream is hopeless.'

And saw him flinch back, saw the terrible retreat in his eyes.

She offered him a faint smile. 'Yes, let this break your vow, Fear Sengar. I am not worth protecting, especially in the name of a dead brother. I trust you see that now.'

'*Yes*,' he whispered.

And in that word was such anguish that Seren Pedac almost cried out. Then railed at herself. *It is what I wanted! Damn it! What I wanted. Needed. It is what must be!*

*Oh, blessed Errant, how you have hurt him, Seren Pedac. Even this one. No different from all the others.*

And she knew, then, that there would be no negotiation.

No way through what was to come.

*So be it. Do not count on me, Fear Sengar. I do not even know my power, nor my control of it. So, do not count on me.*

*But I shall do, for you, what I can.*

A promise, yet one she would not voice out loud, for it was too late for that. She could see as much in his now cold eyes, his now hardened face.

*Better that he expect nothing, yes. So that, should I fail . . .*

But she could not finish that thought, not with every word to follow so brightly painted in her mind – with cowardice.

Fear Sengar set out, leaving her behind. She saw, as she followed, that he no longer held on to his sword. Indeed, he suddenly seemed looser, more relaxed, than she had ever seen him before.

She did not, at that moment, understand the significance of such a transformation. In a warrior. In a warrior who knew how to kill.

Perhaps he had always known where this journey would end. Perhaps that seemingly accidental visit the first time had been anything but, and Udinaas had been shown where his every decision in the interval would take him, as inevitable as the tide. And now, at last, here he had washed up, detritus in the silt-laden water.

*Will I soon be dining on ranag calf? I think not.*

The body of the female Imass was a piteous thing. Desiccated, limbs drawn up as tendons contracted. The wild masses of her hair had grown like roots from a dead tree, the nails of her stubby fingers like flattened talons the hue of tortoiseshell. The smudged garnets that were her eyes had sunk deep within their sockets, yet still seemed to stare balefully at the sky.

*Yes, the Bonecaster. The witch who gave her soul to staunch the wound. So noble, this failed, useless sacrifice. No, woman, for you I will not weep. You should have found another way. You should have stayed alive, among your tribe, guiding them out from their dark cave of blissful ignorance.*

'The world beyond dies,' said Clip, sounding very nearly pleased by the prospect. Rings sang out on the ends of the chain. One silver, one gold, spinning in blurs.

Silchas Ruin eyed his fellow Tiste Andii. 'Clip, you remain blind to . . . necessity.'

A faint, derisive smile. 'Hardly, O White Crow. Hardly.'

The albino warrior then turned to fix his uncanny red-rimmed eyes upon Udinaas. 'Is she still with us?'

Kettle's hand tightened in the ex-slave's, and it was all he could do to squeeze back in reassurance. 'She gauged our location moments ago,' Udinaas replied, earning a hiss from Clip. 'But now, no.'

Silchas Ruin faced the gate. 'She prepares for us, then. On the other side.'

Udinaas shrugged. 'I imagine so.'

Seren Pedac stirred and asked, 'Does that mean she holds the Finnest? Silchas? Udinaas?'

But Silchas Ruin shook his head. 'No. That would not have been tolerated. Not by her sisters. Not by the powerful ascendants who saw it fashioned in the first place—'

'Then why aren't they here?' Seren demanded. 'What makes you think they'll accept your possessing it, Silchas Ruin, when they will not stand for Menandore's owning it – we are speaking of Menandore, aren't we?'

Udinaas snorted. 'Left no stone unturned in my brain, did you, Acquitor?'

Silchas did not reply to her questions.

The ex-slave glanced over at Fear Sengar, and saw a warrior about to go into battle. *Yes, we are that close, aren't we? Oh, Fear Sengar, I do not hate you. In fact, I probably even like you. I may mock the honour you possess. I may scorn this path you've chosen.*

*As I scorned this Bonecaster's, and yes, Edur, for entirely the same reasons.*

*Because I cannot follow.*

Udinaas gently disengaged his hand from Kettle's, then lifted free the Imass spear strapped to his back. He walked over to Seren Pedac. Set the weapon into her hands, ignoring her raised brows, the confusion sliding into her gaze.

*Yes, Acquitor, if you will seek to aid Fear Sengar – and I believe you will – then your need is greater than mine.*

*After all, I intend to run.*

Silchas Ruin drew his two swords, thrust them both point-first into the ground. And then began tightening the various buckles and straps on his armour.

*Yes, no point in rushing in unprepared, is there? You will need to move quickly, Silchas Ruin, won't you? Very quickly indeed.*

He found his mouth was dry.

Dry as this pathetic corpse at his feet.

Seren Pedac gripped his arm. 'Udinaas,' she whispered.

He shook his arm free. 'Do what you must, Acquitor.' *Our great quest, our years of one foot in front of the other, it all draws now to a close.*

*So hail the blood. Salute the inevitability.*

*And who, when all is done, will wade out of this crimson tide?*

*Rud Elalle, my son, how I fear for you.*

Three specks in the sky above the hills to the south. The one named Hedge now half turned and squinted at Ulshun Pral, then said, 'Best withdraw to the cave. Stay close to Onrack the Broken. And Trull Sengar.'

Ulshun Pral smiled.

The man scowled. 'Quick, this oaf doesn't understand Malazan.' He then pointed back towards the rocks. 'Go there! Onrack and Trull. Go!'

The taller man snorted. 'Enough, Hedge. That oaf understands you just fine.'

'Oh, so why ain't he listening to me?'

'How should I know?'

Ulshun waited a moment longer, fixing into his memory the faces of these two men, so that death would not take all of them. He hoped they were doing the same with him, although of course they might well not understand the gift, nor even that they had given it.

Imass knew many truths that were lost to those who were, in every sense, their children. This, alas, did not make Imass superior, for most of those truths were unpleasant ones, and these children could not defend themselves against them, and so would be fatally weakened by their recognition.

For example, Ulshun Pral reminded himself, he had been waiting for this time, understanding all that was coming to this moment, all the truths bound within what would happen. Unlike his people, he had not been a ghost memory. He had not lived countless millennia in a haze of self-delusion. Oh, his life had spanned that time, but it had been just that: a life. Drawn out to near immortality, not through any soul-destroying ritual, but because of this realm. This deathless realm.

That was deathless no longer.

He set out, then, leaving these two brave children, and made his way towards the cave.

It might begin here, beneath this empty sky. But it would end, Ulshun Pral knew, before the Gates of Starvald Demelain.

Where a Bentract Bonecaster had failed. Not because the wound proved too virulent, or too vast. But because the Bonecaster had been nothing more than a ghost to begin with. A faded, pallid soul, a thing with barely enough power to hold on to itself.

Ulshun Pral was twenty paces from the entrance to the cave when Onrack the Broken emerged, and in Ulshun's heart there burgeoned such a welling of pride that tears filled his eyes.

* * *

'So I take it,' Hedge said, locking the foot of his crossbow, 'that what we were both thinking means neither of us is much surprised.'

'She gave in too easily.'

Hedge nodded. 'That she did. But I'm still wondering, Quick, why didn't she grab that damned Finnest a long time ago? Squirrel it away some place where Silchas Ruin would never find it? Answer me that!'

The wizard grunted as he moved out to the crest of the slope. 'She probably thought she'd done just as you said, Hedge.'

Hedge blinked, then frowned. 'Huh. Hadn't thought of that.'

'That's because you're thick, sapper. Now, if this goes the way I want it to, you won't be needed at all. Keep that in mind, Hedge. I'm begging you.'

'Oh, just get on with it.'

'Fine then. I will.'

And Ben Adaephon Delat straightened, then slowly raised his arms.

*His scrawny arms.* Hedge laughed.

The wizard glared back at him over a shoulder. *'Will you stop that?'*

'Sorry! Had no idea you were so touchy.'

Quick Ben cursed, then turned and walked back to Hedge.

And punched him in the nose.

Stunned, eyes filling with tears, the sapper staggered back. Brought a hand to his face to stem the sudden gushing of blood. 'You broke my damned nose!'

'So I did,' the wizard answered, shaking one hand. 'And look, Hedge, you're bleeding.'

'Is it any surprise? Ow—'

'Hedge. You are *bleeding*.'

*I'm – oh, gods.*

'Get it now?'

And Quick turned and walked back, resumed his stance at the crest.

Hedge stared down at his bloody hand. 'Shit!'

Their conversation stopped then.

Since the three dragons were now no longer tiny specks.

Menandore's hatred of her sisters in no way diminished her respect for their power, and against Silchas Ruin that power would be needed. She knew that the three of them, together, could destroy that bastard. Utterly. True, one or two of them might fall. But not Menandore. She had plans to ensure that she would survive.

Before her now, minuscule on the edge of that rise, a lone mortal – the other one was crouching as if in terror, well behind his braver but equally stupid companion – a lone mortal, raising his hands.

*Oh, mage, to think that will be enough.*

*Against us!*

Power burgeoned within her and to either side she felt the same – sudden pressure, sudden promise.

Angling downward now, three man-heights from the basin's tawny grasses, huge shadows drawing closer, yet closer. Sleeting towards that slope.

She unhinged her jaws.

Hedge wiped blood from his face, blinked to clear his vision as he swore at his own throbbing head, and then lifted the crossbow. Just in case. Sweet candy for the middle one, aye.

The trio of dragons, wings wide, glided low above the ground, at a height that would bring them more or less level with the crest of this ancient atoll. They were, Hedge realized, awfully big.

In perfect unison, all three dragons opened their mouths.

And Quick Ben, standing there like a frail willow before a tsunami, unleashed his magic.

The very earth of the slope lifted up, *heaved* up to hammer the dragons like enormous fists into their chests. Necks whipped. Heads snapped back. Sorcery exploded from those jaws, waves lashing skyward – flung uselessly into the air, where the three sorceries clashed, writhing in a frenzy of mutual destruction.

Where the slope had been there were now clouds of dark, dusty earth, pieces of sod still spinning upward, long roots trailing like hair, and the hill lurched as the three dragons, engulfed by tons of earth, crashed into the ground forty paces from where stood Quick Ben.

And down, into that chaotic storm of soil and dragon, the wizard marched.

Waves erupted from him, rolling amidst the crackle of lightning, sweeping down in charging crests. Striking the floundering beasts with a succession of impacts that shook the entire hill. Black fire gouted, rocks sizzled as they were launched into the air, where they simply shattered into dust.

Wave after wave unleashed from the wizard's hands.

Hedge, staggering drunkenly to the edge, saw a dragon, hammered full on, flung onto its back, then pushed, skidding, kicking, like a flesh and blood avalanche, down onto the basin, gouging deep grooves across the flat as it was driven back, and back.

Another, with skin seeming afire, sought to lift itself into the air.

Another wave rose above it, slapped the beast back down with a bone-snapping crunch.

The third creature, half buried beneath steaming soil, suddenly turned then and launched itself straight for the dragon beside it. Jaws opening, magic ripping forth to lance into the side of its once-ally. Flesh exploded, blood spraying in a black cloud.

An ear-piercing shriek, the struck one's head whipping – even as enormous jaws closed on its throat.

Hedge saw that neck collapse in a welter of blood.

More blood poured from the stricken dragon's gaping mouth, a damned fountain of the stuff—

Quick Ben was walking back up the slope, seemingly indifferent to the carnage behind him.

The third dragon, the one driven far out on the basin, at the end of a torn-up track that stretched across the grass like a wound, now lifted itself into the air, streaming blood, and, climbing still higher, banked south and then eastward.

The warring dragons at the base of the slope slashed and tore at each other, yet the attacker would not release its death-grip on the other's neck, and those huge fangs were sawing right through. Then the spine crunched, snapped, and suddenly the severed head and its arm-length's worth of throat fell to the churned ground with a heavy thud. The body kicked, gouging into its slayer's underbelly for a moment longer, then sagged down as a spraying exhalation burst from the severed neck.

Quick Ben staggered onto the summit.

Hedge dragged his eyes from the scene below and stared at the wizard. 'You look like Hood's own arse-wipe, Quick.'

'Feel like it too, Hedge.' He pivoted round, the motion like an old man's. 'Sheltatha – what a nasty creature – turned on Menandore just like that!'

'When she realized they weren't getting past you, aye,' Hedge said. 'The other one's going for the Imass, I'd wager.'

'Won't get past Rud Ellalle.'

'No surprise, since you turned her into one giant bruise.'

Below, Sheltatha Lore, her belly ripped open, was dragging herself away.

Hedge eyed the treacherous beast.

'Aye, sapper,' Quick Ben said in a hollow voice. 'Now you get to play.'

Hedge grunted. 'Damn short playtime, Quick.'

'And then you nap.'

'Funny.'

Hedge raised the crossbow, paused to gauge the angle. Then he settled his right index finger against the release. And grinned. 'Here, suck on this, you fat winged cow.'

A solid *thunk* as the cusser shot out, then down.

Landing within the gaping cavity of Sheltatha Lore's belly.

The explosion sent chunks of dragon flesh in all directions. The thick, red, foul rain showered down on Hedge and Quick Ben. And what might have been a vertebra hammered Hedge right between the eyes, knocking him out cold.

Flung onto his hands and knees by the concussion, Quick Ben stared across at his unconscious friend, then began laughing. Higher-pitched than usual.

As they strode into the cave of paintings, Onrack reached out a hand to stay Ulshun Pral. 'Remain here,' he said.

'That is never easy,' Ulshun Pral replied, yet he halted nonetheless.

Nodding, Onrack looked at the images on the walls. 'You see again and again the flaws.'

'The failing of my hand, yes. The language of the eyes is ever perfect. Rendering it upon stone is where weakness is found.'

'These, Ulshun Pral, show few weaknesses.'

'Even so . . .'

'Remain, please,' Onrack said, slowly drawing his sword. 'The Gate . . . there will be intruders.'

'Yes.'

'Is it you they seek?'

'Yes, Onrack the Broken. It is me.'

'Why?'

'Because a Jaghut gave me something, once, long ago.'

'A Jaghut?'

Ulshun Pral smiled at the astonishment on Onrack's face. 'Here, in this world,' he said, 'we long ago ended our war. Here, we chose peace.'

'Yet that which the Jaghut gave you now endangers you, Ulshun Pral. And your clans.'

Deep thundering concussions suddenly shook the walls around them.

Onrack bared his teeth. 'I must go.'

A moment later Ulshun Pral was alone, in the cave with all the paintings he had fashioned, and there was no light now that Onrack and the torch he had been carrying were gone. As the drums of grim magic reverberated through the rock surrounding him, he remained where he was, motionless, for a dozen heartbeats. Then he set out, after Onrack. On the path to the Gate.

There was, in truth, no choice.

Rud Elalle had led the Imass deeper into the rugged hills, then down the length of a narrow, crooked defile where some past earthquake had broken in half an entire mass of limestone, forming high, angled walls flanking a crack through its heart. At the mouth of this channel, as Rud Elalle urged the last few Imass into the narrow passage, Hostille Rator, Til'aras Benok and Gr'istanas Ish'ilm halted.

'Quickly!' cried Rud Elalle.

But the clan chief was drawing out his cutlass-length obsidian sword with his right hand and a bone-hafted, groundstone maul with his left. 'An enemy

approaches,' Hostille Rator said. 'Go on, Rud Elalle. We three will guard the mouth of this passage.'

They could hear terrible thunder from just south of the old camp.

Rud Elalle seemed at a loss.

Hostille Rator said, 'We did not come to this realm . . . expecting what we have found. We are now flesh, and so too are those Imass you call your own. Death, Rud Elalle, has arrived.' He pointed southward with his sword. 'A lone dragon has escaped the High Mage. To hunt down you and the Bentract. Rud Elalle, even as a dragon, she must land here. She must then semble into her other form. So that she can walk this passageway. We will meet her here, the three of us . . . strangers.'

'I can—'

'No, Rud Elalle. This dragon may not prove the only danger to you and the clans. You must go, you must prepare to stand as their final protector.'

'Why – why do you do this?'

'Because it pleases us.' *Because you please us, Rud Elalle. So too Ulshun Pral. And the Imass . . .*

*And we came here with chaos in our hearts.*

'Go, Rud Elalle.'

Sukul Ankhadu knew her sisters were dead, and for all the shock this realization engendered – the shattering of their plan to destroy Silchas Ruin, to enslave the Finnest of Scabandari and subject that torn, vulnerable soul to endless cruelty – a part of her was filled with glee. Menandore – whom she and Sheltatha Lore had intended to betray in any case – would never again befoul Sukul's desires and ambitions. Sheltatha – well, she had done what was needed, turning upon Menandore at the moment of her greatest weakness. And had she survived that, Sukul would have had to kill the bitch herself.

Extraordinary, that a lone mortal human could unleash such venomous power. No, not a mere mortal human. There were other things hiding inside

that scrawny body, she was certain of that. If she never encountered him again, she would know a life of peace, a life without fear.

Her wounds were, all things considered, relatively minor. One wing was shattered, forcing her to rely almost entirely on sorcery to keep her in the air. An assortment of scrapes and gouges, but already the bleeding had ebbed, the wounds were closing.

She could smell the stench of the Imass, could follow their trail with ease as it wound through the broken hills below.

Rud Elalle was a true child of Menandore. A Soletaken. But so very young, so very naive. If brute force could not defeat him, then treachery would. Her final act of vengeance – and betrayal – against Menandore.

The trail led into a high-walled, narrow channel, one that seemed to lead downward, perhaps to caves. Before its mouth was a small, level clearing, bounded on both sides by boulders.

She dropped down, slowed her flight.

And saw, standing before the defile's entrance, an Imass warrior.

*Good. I can kill. I can feed.*

Settling down into the clearing – a tight fit, her one working wing needing to draw in close – and then sembling, drawing her power inward. Until she stood, not twenty paces from the Imass.

Mortal. Nothing more than what he appeared.

Sukul Ankhadu laughed. She would walk up to him, wrest his stone weapons away, then sink her teeth into his throat.

Still laughing, she approached.

He readied himself, dropping into a crouch.

At ten paces, he surprised her. The maul, swung in a loop underhand, shot out from his extended arm.

Sukul threw herself to one side – had that weapon struck, it would have shattered her skull – then, as the Imass leapt forward with his sword, she reached out and caught his wrist. Twisted, snapping the bones. With her other hand she grasped his throat and lifted him from his feet.

And saw, in his face, a smile – even as she crushed that throat.

Behind her, two Bonecasters, veered into identical beasts – long-legged bears with vestigial tails, covered in thick brown and black hair, with flattened snouts, at their shoulders the height of a Tiste – emerged from the cover of the boulders and, as Hostille Rator died, the Soletaken arrived at a full charge.

Slamming into Sukul Ankhadu, one on her left, the other on her right. Huge talons slashing, massive forelimbs closing about her as jaws, opened wide, tore into her.

Lower canines sank under her left jawline, the upper canines punching down through flesh and bone, and as the beast whipped its head to one side, Sukul's lower jaw, left cheekbones and temporal plate all went with it.

The second beast bit through her right upper arm as it closed its jaws about her ribcage, clamping round a mouthful of crushed ribs and pulped lung.

As the terrible pain and pressure suddenly ripped away from her head, Sukul twisted round. Her left arm – the only one still attached to her – had been holding up the warrior, and now, releasing the dying Imass, she swung that arm backhand, striking the side of the giant bear's head. And with that impact, she released a surge of power.

The beast's head exploded in a mass of bone shards, brains and teeth.

As it fell away, Sukul Ankhadu tried twisting further, to reach across for the second beast's snout.

It lurched back, tearing away ribs and lung.

She spun, driving her hand between the creature's clavicles. Through thick hide, into a welter of spurting blood and soft meat, fingers closing on

the ridged windpipe—

A taloned paw struck the side of her head – the same side as had been mauled by the first beast – and where the temporal plate had been, cerebral matter now sprayed out with the impact. The claws caught more bone and hard cartilage, raked through forebrain on its way back out.

The upper front of Sukul's head and the rest of her face was ripped away, spilling brains out from the gaping space.

At that moment, the other paw hammered what remained from the other side. When it had completed its passage, all that was left was a section of occipital plate attached to a flopping patch of scalp, dangling from the back of the neck.

Sukul Ankhadu's knees buckled. Her left hand exited the wound in the second beast's throat with a sobbing sound.

She might have remained on her knees, balanced by the sudden absence of any weight above her shoulders, but then the creature that had finally killed her lurched forward, its enormous weight crushing her down as the Soletaken, who had once been Til'aras Benok, collapsed, slowly suffocating from a crushed windpipe.

Moments later, the only sound from this modest clearing was the dripping of blood.

Trull Sengar could hear the faint echoes of sorcery and he feared for his friends. Something was seeking to reach this place, and if it – or they – got past Hedge and Quick Ben, then once more Trull would find himself standing before unlikely odds. Even with Onrack at his side . . .

Yet he held his gaze on the gates. The silent flames rose and ebbed within the portals, each to its own rhythm, each tinted in a different hue. The air felt charged. Static sparks crackled in the dust that had begun swirling up from the stone floor.

He heard a sound behind him and turned. Relief flooded through him. 'Onrack—'

'They seek Ulshun Pral,' his friend replied, emerging from the tunnel mouth, two paces, three, then he halted. 'You are too close to those gates, my friend. Come—'

He got no further.

The fires within one of the gates winked out, and from within the suddenly dark portal figures emerged.

Two strides behind Silchas Ruin, Seren Pedac was the next in their group to cross the threshold. She did not know what prompted her to push past Fear Sengar – and attributed no special significance to Clip's hanging back. A strange tug took hold of her soul, a sudden, excruciating yearning that overwhelmed her growing dread. All at once, the stone spear she held in her hands felt light as a reed.

Darkness, a momentary flicker, as of distant light, then she was stepping onto gritty stone.

A cavern. To either side, the raging maws of more gates, flooding all with light.

Before her, Silchas Ruin halted and his swords hissed from their scabbards. Someone was standing before him, but in that moment Seren Pedac's view was blocked by the White Crow.

She saw a barbaric warrior standing further back, and behind him, a lone silhouette standing in the mouth of a tunnel.

To her left Fear Sengar appeared.

She took another step, to bring her round Silchas Ruin, to see the one who had made the albino Tiste Andii pause.

And all at once, the terror began.

On Fear Sengar's face, an expression of profound horror – even as he surged past Seren Pedac. A knife in his raised hand. The blade flashing down towards Silchas Ruin's back.

Then all of Fear's forward motion ceased. The out-thrust arm with its knife flailed, slashed the air even as Silchas Ruin – as if entirely unaware of the attack – took a single step forward.

A terrible gurgling sound from Fear Sengar.

Spinning round, Seren Pedac saw Clip standing immediately behind Fear. Saw the chain between Clip's hands slide almost effortlessly through Fear Sengar's throat. Blood lashed out.

Beyond Clip, Udinaas, with Kettle now held tight in his arms, sought to lunge away, even as a shadow erupted beneath him, writhed about his lower limbs, and dragged the Letherii down to the stone floor, where Wither then swarmed over Udinaas.

Clip released one end of his chain and whipped the length free of Fear Sengar's throat. Eyes staring, the expression of fierce intent fixed upon his face, the Tiste Edur's head sagged back, revealing a slash reaching all the way back to his spine. As Fear Sengar fell, Clip slid in a deadly blur towards Udinaas.

Frozen in shock, Seren Pedac stood rooted. Disbelieving, as a scream of raw denial tore from her throat.

Silchas Ruin's swords were singing as he closed in deadly battle with whomever stood before him. Staccato impacts as those blades were parried with impossible speed.

Wither had wrapped shadow hands around Udinaas's neck. Was choking the life from the ex-slave.

Kettle pulled herself free, then twisted round to pound tiny hands against the wraith.

All at once, a ferocious will burgeoned within Seren Pedac. *The will to kill.* Launched like a javelin towards Wither.

The wraith exploded in shreds—

—as Clip arrived, standing over Udinaas and reaching down one hand to grasp Kettle's tunic between the girl's shoulder blades.

Clip threw the child across the floor. She struck, skidded then rolled like a bundle of rags.

With focused punches of Mockra, Seren Pedac hammered at Clip, sending him staggering. Blood sprayed from his nose, mouth and ears. Then he whipped round, a hand lashing out.

Something pounded Seren Pedac high on her left shoulder. Sudden agony radiated out from the point of impact and all her concentration vanished beneath those overwhelming waves. She looked down and saw a dagger buried to the hilt – stared down at it in disbelief.

There had been no time to think. Trull Sengar was left with naught but recognition. One, then another, arriving in shocks that left him stunned.

From the gate emerged an apparition – and Trull Sengar had stood before this one before, long ago, during a night's vigil over fallen kin. Ghost of darkness. The Betrayer. No longer weaponless, as he had been the first time. No longer half rotted, yet the coals of those terrifying eyes remained, fixed now upon him in bright familiarity.

And, in a low voice, almost a whisper, the Betrayer said, 'Of course it is you. But this battle, it is not—'

At that moment, Trull Sengar saw his brother. Fear, the god of his childhood, the stranger of his last days among the Tiste Edur. Fear, meeting Trull's wide eyes. Seeing the battle about to begin. Comprehending – and then there was a knife in his hand, and, as he surged forward to stab the Betrayer in the back, Trull saw in his brother's face – in an instant – the full measure of Fear's sudden self-awareness, the bitter irony, the truth of generations past returned once more, one last time. *Silchas Ruin, an Edur knife seeking his back.*

When Fear was tugged backward, when his throat opened wide, Trull Sengar felt his mind, his soul, obliterated, inundated by incandescent fury, and he was moving forward, the tip of his spear seeking the slayer of his brother—

And the Betrayer was in his way.

A slash opened up the Betrayer's skin at the base of his throat, the tip skittering away across one clavicle; then a thrust, punching into the apparition's left shoulder muscle.

And all at once the Betrayer's swords wove a skein of singing iron, parrying the spear's every lightning thrust and sweep. And suddenly Trull Sengar's advance stalled, and then he was being driven back, as those swords, hammering the shaft of his spear, tore away bronze sheathing, began splintering the wood.

And Trull Sengar recognized, before him, his own death.

Onrack the Broken saw his friend's attack fail, saw the fight turn, and saw that Trull Sengar was doomed to fall.

Yet he did not move. Could not.

He felt his own heart tearing itself to pieces, for the man behind him – the Imass, Ulshun Pral – was, Onrack knew at once, of his own blood. A revelation, the summation of a thousand mysterious sensations, instincts, the echoing of gestures – Ulshun Pral's very stance, his manner of walking, and the talent of eyes and hand – he was, oh he was . . .

Trull Sengar's spear exploded in the warrior's hands. A sword lashed out —

The blow to her shoulder had driven Seren Pedac down to her knees, then pitched her sideways – and she saw, there before Silchas Ruin, Trull Sengar.

Clip, blood streaming down his face, had turned back to pursue Udinaas, who was crawling, scrabbling towards Kettle.

And before her rose a choice.

*Trull*

*Or Udinaas.*

But, alas, Seren Pedac was never good with choices.

With her hands she sent the stone spear skittering towards Trull Sengar – even as his own weapon shattered into pieces. And, tearing the dagger from

her shoulder, she renewed her Mockra assault on Clip – staggering the bastard once more.

As the sword swung to take Trull in the side of his head, he dropped down, then rolled to evade the second weapon that chopped down. He wasn't fast enough. The edge slammed deep into his right hip, stuck fast in solid bone.

Trull took hold of the Betrayer's forearm and pulled as he twisted – the pain as he sought to trap that embedded sword momentarily blinded him, filling his skull with white fire – and against the other sword he could do nothing—

But the Betrayer, pulled slightly off balance, took a step to the side to right himself – onto the shaft of the stone spear which promptly rolled beneath his weight.

And down he went.

Trull saw the spear, reached for it. Closed both hands about the shaft, then, still lying on his side, one of the singing swords pinned beneath him – the Betrayer's arm stretched out as he sought to maintain his grip – Trull drove the butt end of the spear into his opponent's midsection.

Punching all the air from his lungs.

He plunged backward, rolled, and the sword under Trull slapped down as the Betrayer's hand involuntarily released it. And Trull pounded a hand down on the weapon, dislodging it from the bone of his hip.

The white fire remained in his mind, even as he forced himself onto his knees, then upward. The leg beneath the wound refused to obey him and he snarled in sudden rage, willing himself into a standing position – then, leg dragging, he closed in on the Betrayer—

Seren Pedac – all her efforts at incinerating Clip's brain failing – shrank back as the now grinning Tiste Andii, abandoning his hunt for Udinaas, turned about and advanced on her, drawing out knife and rapier. Crimson teeth, crimson streaks from his eyes like tears—

At that moment, impossibly, Trull Sengar hurt Silchas Ruin – drove the White Crow onto his back where his head snapped back to crunch against the floor, stunning him.

And Clip turned, saw, and raced in a low blur towards Trull.

Meeting a spear that lashed out. Clip parried it at the last moment, surprise on his features, and he skidded to a halt, and was suddenly fighting for his life.

Against a crippled Tiste Edur.

Who drove him back a step.

Then another.

Wounds blossomed on Clip. Left arm. Across the ribs on the right side. Laying open his right cheek.

In a sudden, appallingly fast-shifting attack, Trull Sengar reversed the spear and the stone shaft cracked hard into Clip's right forearm, breaking it. Another *crack*, dislocating the right shoulder – and the knife spun away. Third time, this one on the upper left thigh, hard enough to splinter the femur. A final one, against Clip's left temple – a spray of blood, the head rocking to one side, the body collapsing utterly beneath it. Rapier clunking from a senseless hand.

And Trull then whirled back to Silchas Ruin—

But his wounded leg failed him and he fell – Seren heard his curse like a sharp retort—

The white-skinned Tiste Andii advanced to where Onrack stood. The lone sword in his right hand howled as he readied it.

'Step aside, Imass,' he said. 'The one behind you is mine.'

Onrack shook his head. *He is mine. Mine!*

It was clear that the Tiste Andii saw Onrack's refusal in the face of the Imass warrior, for he suddenly snarled – a sound of raw impatience – and lashed out with his left hand.

Sorcery hammered into Onrack. Lifting him from his feet, high into the air, then slamming him into a wall of stone.

As he dropped down hard onto the floor, a single thought drifted through his mind before unconsciousness took him: *Not again.*

Trull Sengar, lying helpless on the floor, cried out upon seeing Onrack engulfed in magic and then flung away. He struggled to regain his feet, but the leg was a dead weight now, and he was leaving a thick trail of blood as he dragged himself closer to Silchas Ruin.

Then someone was kneeling at his side. Hands soft on one shoulder—

'Stop,' a woman's voice murmured. 'Stop, Trull Sengar. It is too late.'

Udinaas struggled to breathe. Wither's shadowy hands had crushed something in his throat. He felt himself weakening, darkness closing in on all sides.

He had failed.

Even knowing, he had failed.

*This is the truth of ex-slaves, because even that word is a lie. Slavery settles into the soul. My master now is naught but failure itself.*

Forcing himself to remain conscious, he lifted his head. *Drag the breath in, dammit. Lift the head – fail if need be, but do not die. Not yet. Lift the head!*

*And watch.*

Silchas Ruin sheathed his remaining sword, walked up to Ulshun Pral.

And took him by the throat.

A low woman's voice spoke from his left. 'Harm my son, Tiste Andii, and you will not leave here.'

He turned to see a woman, an Imass, clothed in the skin of a panther. She was standing over the prone form of the warrior he had just flung aside.

'That this one lives,' she said, with a gesture down to the Imass at her bared feet, 'is the only reason I have not already torn you to pieces.'

A Bonecaster, and the look in her feline eyes was a dark promise.

Silchas Ruin loosened his hold on the Imass before him, then reached down and deftly plucked free a flint dagger. 'This,' he said, 'is all I need.' And as soon as he held the primitive weapon in his hand, he knew the truth of his claim.

Stepping away, eyes holding the woman's.

She made no move.

Satisfied, Silchas Ruin turned about.

Seren, kneeling beside Trull Sengar, watched the White Crow walk over to where Kettle sat on the stone floor. With his free hand he reached down to her.

A fistful of tunic, a sudden lift, pulling the child into the air, then back down, hard, onto the flat of her back, her head cracking hard on the stone, even as he drove the flint knife into the centre of her chest.

Her small legs kicked, then went still.

Silchas Ruin slowly straightened. Stepped back.

* * *

Udinaas turned his head away, his vision filling with tears. Of course, the child had known, just as *he* had known. Kettle was, after all, the last desperate creation of an Azath.

And here, in this brutal place, she had been joined to a Finnest.

He heard Seren Pedac cry out. Looked once more, blinking to clear his eyes.

Silchas Ruin had backed away, towards one of the gates.

Where Kettle lay, the leather-wrapped handle of the flint knife jutting up from her chest, the air had begun to swirl, darkness condensing. And the

small body was moving in fitful jerks, then a slow writhing of limbs as roots snaked out, sank tendrils into the very stone. Rock hissed, steamed.

Silchas Ruin looked on for a moment longer, then he swung about, collected his second sword, sheathed it, and walked into a gate, vanishing from sight.

His breathing less ragged, Udinaas twisted round, looked for Clip's body – but the bastard was gone. A blood trail leading to one of the gates. *It figures. But oh, I saw Trull Sengar – I saw him take you on, Clip. You, sneering at that paltry weapon, the lowly spear. I saw, Clip.*

The dark cloud surrounding Kettle's body had burgeoned, grown. Stone foundations, black roots, the trickle of water spreading in a stain.

*An Azath, to hold for ever the soul of Scabandari. Silchas Ruin, you have your vengeance. Your perfect exchange.*

And, because he could not help himself, Udinaas lowered his head and began to weep.

Somehow, Trull Sengar forced himself back onto his feet. Although without Seren Pedac at his side, taking much of his weight – and without the spear on which he leaned – she knew that that would have been impossible.

'Please,' he said to her, 'my brother.'

She nodded, wincing as the wound in her shoulder pulsed fresh blood, and began helping him hobble across to where Fear Sengar's body was sprawled, almost at the foot of the now darkened gate.

'What am I to do?' Trull asked, suddenly hesitating and looking to where stood the squat woman wearing the skin of a panther. She and the Imass who had carried the Finnest were both now crouched at the form of a third Imass, a warrior. The woman was cradling the dead or unconscious warrior's head. 'Onrack . . . my friend . . .'

'Kin first,' Seren Pedac said. Then she raised her voice and called out to the Imass. 'Does the fallen one live?'

'Yes,' the warrior replied. 'My father lives.'

A sob broke from Trull Sengar and he sagged against her. Seren staggered beneath his weight for a moment, then straightened. 'Come, my love.'

This caught Trull's attention as, perhaps, nothing else would. He searched her face, her eyes.

'We must return to my house,' she said, even as dread clawed at her heart – *another, after all I have done to those who came before him. Errant forgive me. Another.* 'I carry a sword,' she added. 'And would bury it before the threshold.'

*And shall I then kneel there, dirt on my hands, and cover my eyes? Shall I cry out in grief for what is to come? For all that I will bring to you, Trull Sengar? My burdens—*

'I have dreamed you would say that, Seren Pedac.'

She closed her eyes for a long moment, and then nodded.

They resumed their journey, and when they reached Fear Sengar, she let Trull settle down onto the ground, and he set the spear down, then reached out to touch his brother's ashen, lifeless face.

From nearby, Udinaas – his face streaked in tears – spoke in a harsh, grating voice. 'I greet you, Trull Sengar. And I must tell you . . . your brother, Fear . . . he died as a hero would.'

Trull lifted his head, stared across at the Letherii. 'Udinaas. You are wrong. My brother sought . . . betrayal.'

'No. He saw you, Trull, and he knew the mind of Silchas Ruin. Knew you could never stand against the White Crow. Do you understand me? He saw you.'

'Is that helpful?' Seren Pedac snapped.

Udinaas bared bloodstained teeth. 'With the only alternative *betrayal*, Acquitor, then yes. Trull, I am . . . sorry.

And yet . . . Fear – I am proud of him. Proud to have known him.'

And she saw her beloved nod, then manage a sorrow-filled smile at the ex-slave. 'Thank you, Udinaas. Your journey – all of you – your journey, it must have been long. Difficult.' He glanced to her, then back to Udinaas. 'For remaining at my brother's side, I thank you both.'

*Oh, Trull, may you never know the truth.* Onrack the Broken opened his eyes to an ancient dream, and its conjuration twisted like a knife in his soul. *Not oblivion, then. Such peace is denied me. Instead, my crimes return. To haunt.*

*And yet . . . Ulshun Pral—*

An ancient dream, yes, and hovering just beyond, a far younger dream – one he had not even known to exist. The Ritual of Tellann had stolen from so many men of the Imass this reaching into the future, this creation of sons, daughters, this rooting of life into the soil that lived on.

Yes, that had indeed been a dream—

Kilava Onass suddenly frowned. 'You stare, Onrack, with all the intelligence of a bhederin. Have you lost your wits?'

Dreams did not berate, did they?

'Ah,' she then said, nodding, 'now I see you of old – I see the panic that ever fills a man's eyes, when all he longed for is suddenly within reach. But know this, I too have longed, and I too now feel . . . panic. To love in absence is to float on ever still waters. No sudden currents. No treacherous tides. No possibility of drowning. You and I, Onrack, have floated so for a very long time.'

He stared up at her – yes, he was lying on hard stone. In the cavern of the gates.

Then Kilava smiled, revealing those deadly canines. 'But I fared better, I think. For you gave me a gift, from that one night. You gave me Ulshun Pral. And when I found this . . . this illusion, I found for our son a home, a haven.'

'This realm . . . dies,' Onrack said. 'Are we all illusions now?'

Kilava shook her head, the luxuriant black hair shimmering. 'Gothos gave to our son the Finnest. As for the rest, well, your son has explained it to me. The white-skinned Tiste Andii, Silchas Ruin, delivered the seed of an Azath, a seed in the guise of a child. To accept the Finnest, to use its power to grow. Onrack, soon these gates will be sealed, each and all drawn into the House, into a squat, clumsy tower. And this realm – with an Azath House here, this realm no longer wanders, no longer fades. It is rooted, and so it will remain.'

Behind her, Ulshun Pral said, 'Gothos said Silchas Ruin would one day come for the Finnest. Gothos thought that was . . . funny. Jaghut,' he then said, 'are strange.'

Kilava Onass added, 'To win his freedom, Silchas Ruin bargained with an Azath, an Azath that was dying. And now he has done what was asked of him. And the Azath is reborn.'

'Then . . . we need not have fought.'

Kilava scowled. 'Never trust a Tiste Andii.' Her luminous eyes flickered away briefly. 'It seems there were other . . . issues.'

But Onrack was not ready to think of those. He continued staring up at Kilava Onass. 'You, then, that night in darkness.'

Her scowl deepened. 'Were you always this thick? I cannot remember – by the spirits, my panic worsens. Of course it was me. You bound me to stone, with your eyes and hand. With, Onrack, your love. Yours was a forbidden desire and it wounded so many. But not me. I knew only that I must give answer. I must let my heart speak.' She laid a hand on his chest. 'As yours now does. You are flesh and blood, Onrack. The Ritual has relinquished your soul. Tell me, what do you seek?'

He held his eyes on hers. 'I have found it,' he said.

Every bone in his body ached as he forced himself to his feet. At once his gaze was drawn to where he had last seen Trull Sengar; and a growing dread was swept from his mind upon seeing his friend.

*Trull Sengar, you are as hard to kill as I am.*

A moment later, he saw the tears on his friend's face, and it seemed there would be grief this day, after all.

At the mouth of a fissure not far away, in a small clearing, Rud Elalle stood in the midst of carnage. Where one of his mother's sisters had died. Where three Imass had died.

And somewhere beyond, he knew in his heart, he would find the body of his mother.

He stood on blood-soaked ground, and wondered what it was that had just died within his own soul.

Some time later, much later, he would find the word to describe it.

Innocence.

Quick Ben still hobbled like an old man, amusing Hedge no end. 'There you are,' he said as they made their way towards the cave and its tunnel leading to the Gates of Starvald Demelain, 'exactly how you'll look twenty years from now. Creepy and gamey. Pushing wobbly teeth with a purple tongue and muttering rhymes under your breath—'

'Keep talking, sapper, and you'll know all about loose teeth. In fact, I'm surprised a few weren't knocked right out when that bone hit you. Gods below, that is probably the funniest thing I have ever seen.'

Hedge reached and gingerly touched the huge lump on his forehead. 'So, we did our task today. How do you think the others fared?'

'We'll soon find out,' the wizard replied. 'One thing, though.'

'What?'

'There is now an Azath House growing in this damned realm.'

'Meaning?'

'Oh, lots of things. First, this place is now real. And it will live on. These Imass will live on.'

Hedge grunted. 'Rud Elalle will be pleased. Onrack, too, I imagine.'

'Aye. And here's another thing, only I don't think it'll please anyone. In that Azath House there will be a tower, and in that tower, all the gates.'

'So?'

Quick Ben sighed. 'You damned idiot. The Gates of Starvald Demelain.'

'And?'

'Just this. Shadowthrone, and Cotillion. Who like using the Azath whenever it suits them. Now they've got a way in. Not just to this realm, either.'

'Into Starvald Demelain? Gods below, Quick! *Is that why we just did all that? Is that what brought you here?* '

'No need to scream, sapper. When it came to planting that House, we weren't even witnesses. Were we? But you know, it's what those two sneaky bastards know, or seem to know, that really worries me. See my point?'

'Oh, Hood piss in your boots, Ben Adaephon Delat.'

'Got all your gear there, Hedge? Good. Because once we get to the Gates, we're going through one of them.'

'We are?'

'We are.' And the wizard grinned across at the sapper.

'Fid's never been the same without you.'

Silchas Ruin stood among ancient foundations – some Forkrul Assail remnant slumping its slow way down the mountainside – and lifted his face to the blue sky beyond the towering trees.

He had fulfilled his vow to the Azath.

And delivered unto the soul of Scabandari a reprieve Bloodeye did not deserve.

Vengeance, he well knew, was a poisoned triumph.

One task remained. A minor one, intended to serve little more than his own sense of redressing an egregious imbalance. He knew little of this Crippled God. But what little he knew, Silchas Ruin did not like.

Accordingly, he now spread his arms. And veered into his dragon form.

Surged skyward, branches torn away from the trees he shouldered aside. Into the crisp mountain air – far to the west, a pair of condors banked away in sudden terror. But the direction Silchas Ruin chose was not to the west.

South.

To a city called Letheras.

And this time, in truth, there was blood on his mind.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

If these were our last days
If all whose eyes can look inward
Now passed from ken
Who would remain to grieve?

As we hang our heads
Beset by the failure of ambition
Eyes see and are indifferent
Eyes witness and they are uncaring.

The stone regard of the statues
Guarding the perfected square
Is carved as warm
As history's soft surrender,

And the dancing creatures
In and out of our gaping mouths
Alone hear the wind moaning
Its hollow, hallowed voice.

So in these our last days
The end of what we see is inside
Where it all began and begins never again
A moment's reprieve, then darkness falls.

*The Unwitnessed Dance*
Fisher kel Tath

Beak's barrow began with a few bones tossed into the ash and charred, splintered skeleton that was all that remained of the young mage. Before long, other objects joined the heap. Buckles, clasps, fetishes, coins, broken weapons. By the time Fist Keneb was ready to give the command to march, the mound was nearly the height of a man. When Captain Faradan Sort asked Bottle for a blessing, the squad mage had shaken his head, explaining

that the entire killing field that had been enclosed by Bottle's sorcery was now magically dead. Probably permanently. At this news the captain had turned away, although Keneb thought he heard her say: *'Not a candle left to light, then.'*

As the marines set out for the city of Letheras, they could hear the rumble of detonations from the south, where the Adjunct had landed with the rest of the Bonehunters and was now engaging the Letherii armies. That thunder, Keneb knew, did not belong to sorcery.

He should be leading his troops to that battle, to hammer the Letherii rearguard, and then link up with Tavore and the main force. But Keneb agreed with the captain and with Fiddler and Gesler. He and his damned marines had earned this, had earned the right to be the first to assail this empire's capital city.

'Might be another army waiting on the walls,' Sergeant Thom Tissy had said, making his face twist in his singular expression of disapproval, like a man who'd just swallowed a nacht turd.

'It's possible there is,' the Fist had conceded. And that particular conversation went no further.

Up onto the imperial road with its well-set cobbles and breadth sufficient to accommodate a column ten soldiers wide. Marching amidst discarded accoutrements and the rubbish left by the Letherii legions as the day drew to a close and the shadows lengthened.

Dusk was not far off and the last sleep had been some time past, yet his soldiers, Keneb saw, carried themselves – and their gear – as if fresh from a week's rest.

A few hundred paces along, the column ran into the first refugees.

Smudged, frightened faces. Sacks and baskets of meagre provisions, wide-eyed babies peering from bundles. Burdened mules and two-wheeled carts creaking and groaning beneath possessions. No command was given, yet the Letherii shuffled to the roadsides, pulling whatever gear they had

with them, as the column continued on. Eyes downcast, children held tight. Saying nothing at all.

Faradan Sort moved alongside Keneb. 'This is odd,' she said.

The Fist nodded. 'They have the look of people fleeing something that's already happened. Find one, Captain, and get some answers.'

'Aye, sir.'

Studying the refugees he passed, Keneb wondered what was behind the glances a few of them furtively cast on these marching soldiers, these white-haired foreigners in their gleaming armour. *Do they see saviours? Not a chance. Yet, where is the hostility? They are more frightened of what they've just left behind in Letheras than they are of us. What in Hood's name is happening there?*

*And where are the Tiste Edur?*

The crowds got thicker, more reluctant to move aside. Fiddler adjusted the pack on his shoulder and settled a hand on the grip of his shortsword. The column's pace had slowed, and the sergeant could feel the growing impatience among his troops.

They could see the end – Hood's breath – it was behind that white wall to the northeast, now a league or less distant. The imperial road stretching down towards them from a main gate was, in the red glare of sunset, a seething serpent. *Pouring out by the thousands.*

*And why?*

Riots, apparently. An economy in ruins, people facing starvation.

'Never knew we could cause such trouble, eh Fid?'

'Can't be us, Cuttle. Not just us, I mean. Haven't you noticed? There are no Tiste Edur in this crowd. Now, either they've retreated behind their estate walls, or to the palace keep or whatever it is where the Emperor lives, or they were the first to run.'

'Like those behind us, then. Heading back to their homelands in the north.'

'Maybe.'

'So, if this damned empire is already finished, why are we bothering with the capital?'

Fiddler shrugged. 'Bottle might have hidden one of his rats in the Adjunct's hair – why not ask him?'

'Adjunct ain't got enough hair for that,' Cuttle muttered, though he did glance back at the squad mage. Bottle did not deign to reply. 'See anybody on those walls, Fid? My eyes are bad in bad light.'

'If there are, they're not holding torches,' Fiddler replied.

There had been so little time to think. About anything, beyond just staying alive. Ever since the damned coast. But now, as he walked on this road, Fiddler found his thoughts wandering dusty paths. They had set out on this invasion in the name of vengeance. And, maybe, to eradicate a tyrannical Emperor who viewed anyone not his subject as meat for the butcher's cleaver. *All very well, as far as it goes. Besides, that hardly makes this Emperor unique.*

*So why is this our battle? And where in Hood's name do we go from here?* He so wanted to believe the Adjunct knew what she was doing. And that, whatever came and however it ended, there would be some meaning to what they did.

*'We must be our own witness.' To what, dammit?*

'Soldiers on the wall,' Koryk called out. 'Not many, but they see us clear enough.'

Fiddler sighed. *First to arrive, and maybe that's as far as we'll get. An army of eight hundred camped outside one gate. They must be pissing in their boots.* He drew another deep breath, then shook himself. 'Fair enough. We finally got an appreciative audience.'

Smiles didn't much like the look of these refugees. The pathetic faces, the shuffling gaits, they reminded her too much of . . . *home*. Oh, there'd been nothing in the way of hopeless flight back then, so it wasn't that, exactly.

Just the dumb animal look in these eyes. The uncomprehending children dragged along by one hand, or clinging to mother's ratty tunic.

The Bonehunters marched to Letheras – why weren't these fools screaming and wailing in terror? *They're like slaves, pushed into freedom like sheep into the wilds, and all they expect ahead is more slavery. That, or dying in the tangles of empty forests. They've been beaten down. All their lives.*

*That's what's so familiar. Isn't it?*

She turned her head and spat onto the road. *Hood take all empires. Hood take all the prod and pull. If I get to you, dear Emperor of Lether – if I get to you first, I'm going to slice you into slivers. Slow, with lots of pain. For every one of these wretched citizens on this stinking road.*

*Now, the sooner all these fools get out of our way, the sooner I can torture their Emperor.*

'We head for the palace,' Koryk said to Tarr. 'And let nothing get in our way.'

'You're smoke-dreaming, Koryk,' the corporal replied. 'We'd have to cut through a few thousand stubborn Letherii to do that. And maybe even more Edur. And if that's not enough, what about that wall there? Plan on jumping it? We haven't got enough munitions to—'

'Rubbish—'

'I mean, there's no way Keneb's going to allow the sappers to use up all their stuff, not when all we have to do is wait for the Adjunct, then do a siege all proper.'

Koryk snorted. 'Proper like Y'Ghatan? Oh, I can't wait.'

'There's no Leoman of the Flails in Letheras,' Tarr said, tugging at his chin strap. 'Just some Edur on the throne. Probably drunk. Insane. Drooling and singing lullabies. So, why bother with the palace? Won't be anything of interest there. I say we loot some estates, Koryk.'

'Malazan soldiers don't loot.'

'But we're not any more, are we? I mean, soldiers of the Malazan Empire.'

Koryk sneered at his corporal. 'So that means you just sink back down to some frothing barbarian, Tarr? Why am I not surprised? I never believed all those civilized airs you're always putting on.'

'What airs?'

'Well, all right, maybe it's just how everybody sees you. But now I'm seeing you different. A damned thug, Tarr, just waiting to get nasty on us.'

'I was just thinking out loud,' Tarr said. 'It's not like Fid's gonna let us do whatever we want, is it?'

'*I'm* not gonna let you do whatever you want, Tarr.'

'Just making conversation, Koryk. That's all it was.'

Koryk grunted.

'You being insolent with your corporal, Koryk?'

'I'm thinking of pushing all your armour – and your shield – right up your bung hole, Corporal. Is that insolent?'

'Once I'm used to telling the difference, I'll let you know.'

'Listen, Corabb,' Bottle said, 'you can stop looking out for me now, all right?'

The round-shouldered warrior at his side shook his head. 'Sergeant Fiddler says—'

'Never mind that. We're in column. Hundreds of marines on all sides, right? And I'm almost rested up, ready to make trouble in case we get ambushed or whatever. I'm safe here, Corabb. Besides, you keep hitting me with that scabbard – my leg's all bruised.'

'Better a bruise than a chopped-off head,' Corabb said.

'Well, that's a fact.'

Corabb nodded, as if the issue was now closed.

Bottle rubbed at his face. The memory of Beak's sacrifice haunted him. He'd not known the mage very well. Just a face with a gawking expression or a wide smile, a pleasant enough man not much older than Bottle himself. For some – for the rarest few – the paths to power were smooth, uncluttered, and yet the danger was always there. *Too easy to draw too much, to let it just pour through you.*

*Until you're nothing but ashes.*

Yet Beak had won their lives. The problem was, Bottle wondered if it had been worth it. That maybe the lives of eight hundred marines weren't worth the life of a natural High Mage. Whatever was coming, at the very end of this journey, was going to be trouble. The Adjunct had Sinn and that was it. Another natural talent – *but I think she's mad.*

*Adjunct, your High Mage is insane. Will that be a problem?*

He snorted.

Corabb took that sound as an invitation to talk. 'See the fear in these people, Bottle? The Bonehunters turn their hearts to ice. When we reach the gate, it will swing wide open for us. The Letherii soldiers will throw down their arms. The people shall deliver to us the Emperor's head on a copper plate, and roses will be flung into our path—'

'For Hood's sake, Corabb, enough. You keep looking for glory in war. But there is no glory. And heroes, like Beak back there, they end up dead. Earning what? A barrow of rubbish, that's what.'

But Corabb was shaking his head. 'When I die—'

'It won't be in battle,' Bottle finished.

'You wound me with your words.'

'You've got the Lady in your shadow, Corabb. You'll keep scraping through. You'll break weapons or they'll fly from your hand. Your horse will flip end over end and land right side up, with you still in the saddle. In fact, I'd wager all my back pay that you'll be the last one of us standing at the very end.'

'You believe there will be a fight in this city?'

'Of course there will, you idiot. In fact, I'd be surprised if we even get inside the walls, until the Adjunct arrives. But then, aye, we're in for a messy street-by-street battle, and the only thing certain about that is a lot of us are going to get killed.'

Corabb spat on his hands, rubbed them together.

Bottle stared. The fool was actually smiling.

'You need fear nothing,' Corabb assured him, 'for I will guard you.'

'Wonderful.'

Hellian scowled. Damned crowded road, was it always like this? Must be a busy city, and everybody going on about things like there wasn't a column of foreign invaders pushing through them. She was still feeling the heat of shame – she'd fallen asleep back on that killing field. Supposed to be ready to fight and if not fight, then die horribly in a conflagration of piss-reeking magic, and what does she do?

Fall asleep. And dream of white light, and fires that don't burn, and because everybody had known she was dreaming they'd all decided to pull out their hidden supplies of aeb root paste and bleach their hair, and then polish all their gear. Well. Ha ha. Damned near the most elaborate joke ever pulled on her. But she wasn't going to let on about any of it. Pretend, aye, that nothing looked any different, and when her soldiers went over to where that one marine had died – the only casualty in the entire battle and there must have been some kind of battle since the evil Letherii army had run away – well, she'd done the same. Left on the mound an empty flask and if that wasn't honouring the idiot then what was?

But it was getting dark, and all these moon faces peering at them from the roadsides was getting eerie. She'd seen one baby, in an old woman's scrawny arms, stick out its tongue at her, and it had taken all her self-control to keep from pulling her sword and lopping off the tyke's little round head or maybe just twisting its ears or even tickling it to death, and so it was a good thing that nobody else could listen in on her thoughts

because then they'd know she'd been rattled bad by that joke and her falling asleep when she should have been sergeant.

*My polished sword at that. Which I can use to cut off all my white hair if I want to. Oh yes, they did it all to me and mine, too.*

Someone stumbled on the back of her heel and she half turned. 'Get back, Corpor—' But it wasn't Touchbreath. It was that sultry dark-eyed lad, the one she'd already had fantasies about and maybe they weren't fantasies at all, the way he licked his lips when their eyes met. *Scupperskull. No, Skulldeath.* 'You in my squad now?' she asked.

A broad delicious smile answered her.

'The fool's besotted,' her corporal said from behind Skulldeath. 'Might as well adopt him, Sergeant,' he added in a different voice. 'Or marry him. Or both.'

'You ain't gonna confuse me, Corporal, talking back and forth like that. Just so you know.'

All at once the crowds thinned on the road, and there, directly ahead, the road was clear, rising to the huge double gates of the city. The gates were barred. 'Oh,' Hellian said, 'that's just terrific. We gotta pay a toll now.'

The commander of the Letherii forces died with a quarrel in his heart, one of the last to fall at the final rally point four hundred paces in from the river. Shattered, the remaining soldiers flung away their weapons and fled the battle. The enemy had few mounted troops, so the pursuit was a dragged-out affair, chaotic and mad as the day's light ebbed, and the slaughter pulled foreign soldiers well inland as they hunted down their exhausted, panic-stricken foes.

Twice, Sirryn Kanar had barely eluded the ruthless squads of the enemy, and when he heard the unfamiliar horns moan through the dusk, he knew the recall had been sounded. Stumbling, all his armour discarded, he scrabbled through brush and found himself among the levelled ruins of one of the shanty-towns outside the city wall. All these preparations for a siege,

and now it was coming. He needed to get back inside, he needed to get to the palace.

Disbelief and shock raced on the currents of his pounding heart. He was smeared in sweat and the blood of fallen comrades, and uncontrollable shivers rattled through him as if he was plagued with a fever. He had never before felt such terror. The thought of his life ending, of some cowardly bastard driving a blade into his precious body. The thought of all his dreams and ambitions gushing away in a red torrent to soak the ground. These had pushed him from the front lines, had sent him running as fast as his legs could carry him. There was no honour in dying alongside one's comrades – he'd not known any of them anyway. Strangers, and strangers could die in droves for all he cared. No, only one life mattered: his own.

And, Errant be praised, Sirryn had lived. Escaping that dark slaughter.

The Chancellor would have an answer to all of this. The Emperor – his Tiste Edur – Hannan Mosag – they would all give answer to these foreign curs. And in a year, maybe less, the world would be right once more, Sirryn ranking high in the Chancellor's staff, and higher still in the Patriotists. Richer than he'd ever been before. A score of soft-eyed whores within his reach. He could grow fat if he liked.

Reaching the wall, he made his way along its length. There were sunken posterns, tunnels that invited breaching yet were designed to flood with the pull of a single lever. He knew the thick wooden doors would be manned on the inside. Working his way along the foot of the massive wall, Sirryn continued his search.

He finally found one, the recessed door angled like a coal trap, thick grasses snarled on all sides. Muttering his thanks to the Errant, Sirryn slipped down into the depression, and leaned against the wood for a long moment, his eyes shut, his breathing slowing.

Then he drew out his one remaining weapon, a dagger, and began tapping the pommel against the wood.

And thought he heard a sound on the other side.

Sirryn pressed his cheek against the door. '*Tap if you can hear me!* ' His own rasp sounded frighteningly loud in his ears.

After a half-dozen heartbeats, he heard a faint tap.

*'I'm Finadd Sirryn Kanar, an agent of the Chancellor's. There's no-one else about. Let me through in the name of the Empire! '*

Again, another long wait. Then he heard the sound of the bar scraping clear, and then a weight pushed against him and he scrabbled back to let the door open.

The young face of a soldier peered up at him. 'Finadd?'

Very young. Sirryn edged down into the entranceway, forcing the soldier back. *So young I could kiss him, take him right here, by the Errant!* 'Close this door, quickly!'

'What has happened?' the soldier asked, hastening to shut the portal, then, in the sudden darkness, struggling with the heavy bar. 'Where is the army, sir?'

As the bar clunked back in place, Sirryn allowed himself, at last, to feel safe. Back to his old form. He reached out, grasped a fistful of tunic, and dragged the soldier close. 'You damned fool! Anybody calling himself a Finadd and you open the damned door? I should have you flailed alive, soldier! In fact, I think I will!'

'P-please, sir, I just—'

'Be quiet! You're going to need to convince me another way, I think.'

'Sir?'

There was still time. That foreign army was a day away, maybe more. And he was feeling so very alive at this moment. He reached up and stroked the lad's cheek. And heard a sudden intake of breath. Ah, a quick-witted lad, then. It would be easy to—

A knife-tip pricked just under his right eye, and all at once the soldier's young voice hardened. 'Finadd, you want to live to climb out the other end

of this tunnel, then you'll leave off right here. Sir.'

'I'll have your name—'

'You're welcome to it, Finadd, and may the Errant bless your eternal search – because I wasn't behind this door as a guard, sir. I was readying to make my escape.'

'Your what?'

'The mob rules the streets, Finadd. All we hold right now are the walls and gate houses. Oh, and the Eternal Domicile, where our insane Emperor keeps killing champions like it was a civic holiday. Nobody's much interested in besieging that place. Besides, the Edur left yesterday. All of them. Gone. So, Finadd, you want to get to your lover Chancellor, well, you're welcome to try.'

The knife pressed down, punctured skin and drew out a tear of blood. 'Now, sir. You can make for the dagger at your belt, and die. Or you can let go of my shirt.'

Insolence and cowardice were hardly attractive qualities. 'Happy to oblige, soldier,' Sirryn said, releasing his hold on the man. 'Now, if you're going out, then I had better remain here and lock the door behind you, yes?'

'Finadd, you can do whatever you please once I'm gone. So back away, sir. No, farther. That's good.'

Sirryn waited for the soldier to escape. He could still feel that knife-tip and the wound stung as sweat seeped into it. It was not cowardice, he told himself, that had forced him back, away from this hot-headed bastard busy disgracing his uniform. Simple expedience. He needed to get to the Chancellor, didn't he? That was paramount.

And now, absurdly, he would have to face making his way, unescorted, through the very city where he had been born, in fear for his life. The world had turned on its end. *I could just wait here, yes, in this tunnel, in the dark – no, the foreigners are coming. The Eternal Domicile – where, if surrender is demanded, Triban Gnol can do the negotiating, can oversee the handing over of the Emperor. And the Chancellor will want his loyal guards at his*

*side. He'll want Finadd Sirryn Kanar, the last survivor of the battle at the river – Sirryn Kanar, who broke through the enemy lines to rush back to his Chancellor, bearer, yes, of grim news. Yet he won through, did he not?*

The soldier lowered the door back down from the other side. Sirryn moved up to it, found the bar and lifted it into place. He could reach the Eternal Domicile, even if it meant swimming the damned canals.

*I still live. I can win through all of this.*

*There's not enough of these foreigners to rule the empire.*

*They'll need help, yes.*

He set out along the tunnel.

The young soldier was twenty paces from the hidden door when dark figures rose on all sides and he saw those terrifying crossbows aimed at him. He froze, slowly raised his hands.

One figure spoke, then, in a language the soldier did not understand, and he flinched as someone stepped round him from behind – a woman, grinning, daggers in her gloved hands. She met his eyes and winked, then mimed a kiss.

'We not yet decide let you live,' the first one then said in rough Letherii. 'You spy?'

'No,' the soldier replied. 'Deserter.'

'Honest man, good. You answer all our questions? These doors, tunnels, why do sappers' work for us? Explain.'

'Yes, I will explain everything. I don't want to die.'

Corporal Tarr sighed, then turned from the prisoner to face Koryk. 'Better get Fid and the captain, Koryk. Looks like maybe we won't have to knock down any walls after all.'

Smiles snorted, sheathing her knives. 'No elegant back stab. And no torture. This isn't any fun at all.' She paused, then added, 'Good thing we didn't take down the first one, though, isn't it? Led us right to this.'

* * *

Their horses had not been exercised nearly enough, and were now huffing, heads lifting and falling as Sergeant Balm led his small troop inland. Too dark now to hunt Letherii and besides, the fun had grown sour awfully fast. Sure, slaughter made sense when on the enemy's own soil, since every soldier who got away was likely to fight again, and so they'd chased down the miserable wretches. But it was tiring work.

When magic wasn't around in a battle, Moranth munitions took its place, and the fit was very nice indeed. *As far as we're concerned, anyway. Gods, just seeing those bodies – and pieces of bodies – flying up into the air – and I was getting all confused, at the beginning there. Bits of Letherii everywhere and all that ringing in my ears.*

He'd come around sharp enough when he saw Cord's idiot sapper, Crump, running up the slope straight at the enemy line, with a Hood-damned cusser in each hand. If it hadn't been for all those blown-up Letherii absorbing so much of the twin blasts then Crump would still be standing there. His feet, anyway. The rest of him would be red haze drifting into the sunset. As it was, Crump was flattened beneath an avalanche of body parts, eventually clambering free like one of Hood's own revenants. Although Balm was pretty sure revenants didn't smile.

Not witless smiles, anyway.

Where the cussers had not obliterated entire companies of the enemy, the main attack – wedges of advancing heavies and medium infantry with a thin scattering of skirmishers and sappers out front – had closed with a hail of sharpers, virtually disintegrating the Letherii front ranks. And then it was just the killing thrust with those human wedges, ripping apart the enemy's formations, driving the Letherii soldiers back until they were packed tight and unable to do anything but die.

The Adjunct's Fourteenth Army, the Bonehunters, had shown, at long last, that they knew how to fight. She'd gotten her straight-in shield to shield dragged-out battle, and hadn't it been just grand?

Riding ahead as point was Masan Gilani. Made sense, using her. First off, she was the best rider by far, and secondly, there wasn't a soldier, man or woman, who could drag their eyes off her delicious round behind in that saddle, which made following her easy. Even in the gathering dark, aye. *Not that it actually glows. I don't think. But . . . amazing how we can all see it just fine. Why, could be a night without any other moon and no stars and nothing but the Abyss on all sides, and we'd follow that glorious, jiggling—*

Balm sawed his reins, pulling off to one side, just missing Masan Gilani's horse – which was standing still, and Masan suddenly nowhere in sight.

Cursing, he dragged his weary horse to a halt, raising a hand to command those behind him to draw up.

'Masan?'

'Over here,' came the luscious, heavenly voice, and a moment later she emerged out of the gloom ahead. 'We're on the killing field.'

'Not a chance,' Throatslitter said from behind Balm. 'No bodies, Masan, no nothing.'

Deadsmell rode a few paces ahead, then stopped and dismounted. He looked round in the gloom. 'No, she's right,' he said. 'This was where Keneb's marines closed ranks.'

They'd all seen the strange glow to the north – seen it from the ships, in fact, when the transports did their neat turn and surged for the shoreline. And before that, well, they'd seen the Letherii sorcery, that terrifying wave climbing into the sky and it was then that everyone knew the marines were finished. No Quick Ben to beat it all back, even if he could have, and Balm agreed with most everyone else that, good as he was, he wasn't that good. No Quick Ben, and no Sinn – aye, there she was, perched on the bow of the *Froth Wolf* with Grub at her side, staring at that dreadful conjuration.

When the thing rolled forward and then crashed down, well, curses rang in the air, curses or prayers and sometimes both, and this, soldiers said, was worse even than Y'Ghatan, and those poor damned marines, always getting their teeth kicked in, only this time nobody was coming out. The only thing

that'd be pushing up from the ground in a few days' time would be slivers of burnt bone.

So the Bonehunters on the transports had been a mean-spirited bunch by the time they emptied the water out of their boots and picked up their weapons. Mean, aye, as that Letherii army could attest to, oh yes.

After the Letherii magic had faded, crashed away as if to nothing in the distance, there had been a cry from Sinn, and Balm had seen with his own eyes Grub dancing about on the foredeck. And then everyone else had seen that blue-white dome of swirling light, rising up from where the Letherii magic had come down.

What did it mean?

Cord and Shard had gone up to Sinn, but she wasn't talking which was a shock to them all. And all Grub said was something that nobody afterwards could even agree on, and since Balm hadn't heard it himself he concluded that Grub probably hadn't said anything at all, except maybe '*I got to pee*' which explained all that dancing.

'Could it be that Letherii magic turned them all into dust?' Throatslitter wondered now as he walked on the dew-laden field.

'And left the grasses growing wild?' Masan Gilani countered.

'Something over here,' Deadsmell said from ten or so paces on.

Balm and Throatslitter dismounted and joined Masan Gilani – slightly behind her to either side. And the three of them set off after Deadsmell, who was now fast disappearing in the gloom.

'Slow up there, Corporal!' *It's not like the Universal Lodestone is bouncing up there with you, is it?*

They saw that Deadsmell had finally halted, standing before a grey heap of something.

'What did you find?' Balm asked.

'Looks like a shell midden,' Throatslitter muttered.

'Hah, always figured you for a fisher's spawn.'

'Spawn, ha ha, that's so funny, Sergeant.'

'Yeah? Then why ain't you laughing? On second thought, don't – they'll hear it in the city and get scared. Well, scareder than they already are.'

They joined Deadsmell.

'It's a damned barrow,' said Throatslitter. 'And look, all kinds of Malazan stuff on it. Gods, Sergeant, you don't think all that's left of all those marines is under this mound?'

Balm shrugged. 'We don't even know how many made it this far. Could be six of 'em. In fact, it's a damned miracle any of 'em did in the first place.'

'No no,' Deadsmell said. 'There's only one in there, but that's about all I can say, Sergeant. There's not a whisper of magic left here and probably never will be. It's all been sucked dry.'

'By the Letherii?'

The corporal shrugged. 'Could be. That ritual was a bristling pig of a spell. Old magic, rougher than what comes from warrens.'

Masan Gilani crouched down and touched a badly notched Malazan shortsword. 'Looks like someone did a lot of hacking with this thing, and if they made it this far doing just that, well, beat-up or not, a soldier doesn't just toss it away like this.'

'Unless the dead one inside earned the honour,' Deadsmell said, nodding.

'So,' Masan concluded, 'a Malazan. But just one.'

'Aye, just the one.'

She straightened. 'So where are the rest of them?'

'Start looking for a trail or something,' Balm said to Masan Gilani.

They all watched her head off into the gloom.

Then smiled at each other.

* * *

Lostara Yil walked up to where stood the Adjunct. 'Most of the squads are back,' she reported. 'Pickets are being set now.'

'Has Sergeant Balm returned?'

'Not yet, Adjunct.' She hesitated, then added, 'Fist Keneb would have sent a runner.'

Tavore turned slightly to regard her. 'Would he?'

Lostara Yil blinked. 'Of course. Even at full strength – which we know would be impossible – he doesn't have the soldiers to take Letheras. Adjunct, having heard nothing, we have to anticipate the worst.'

During the battle, Lostara Yil had remained close to her commander, although at no point was the Adjunct in any danger from the Letherii. The landing had been quick, professional. As for the battle, classic Malazan, even without the usual contingent of marines to augment the advance from the shoreline. *Perfect, and brutal.*

The Letherii were already in poor shape, she saw. Not from any fight, but from a fast march from well inland – probably where the wave of sorcery had erupted. Disordered in their exhaustion, and in some other, unaccountable way, profoundly rattled.

Or so had been the Adjunct's assessment, after watching the enemy troops form ranks.

And she had been proved right. The Letherii had shattered like thin ice on a puddle. And what had happened to their mages? Nowhere in sight, leading Lostara to believe that those mages had used themselves up with that terrible conflagration they'd unleashed earlier.

Moranth munitions broke the Letherii apart – the Letherii commander had sent archers down the slope and the Bonehunters had had to wither a hail of sleeting arrows on their advance. There had been three hundred or so killed or wounded but there should have been more. Malazan armour, it turned out, was superior to the local armour; and once the skirmishers drew within

range of their crossbows and sharpers, the enemy archers took heavy losses before fleeing back up the slope.

The Malazans simply followed them.

Sharpers, a few cussers sailing over the heads of the front Letherii ranks. Burners along the slope of the far left flank to ward off a modest cavalry charge. Smokers into the press to sow confusion. And then the wedges struck home.

Even then, had the Letherii stiffened their defence along the ridge, they could have bloodied the Malazans. Instead, they melted back, the lines collapsing, writhing like a wounded snake, and all at once the rout began. And with it, unmitigated slaughter.

The Adjunct had let her soldiers go, and Lostara Yil understood that decision. So much held down, for so long – *and the growing belief that Fist Keneb and all his marines were dead. Murdered by sorcery. Such things can only be answered one sword-swing at a time, until the arm grows leaden, until the breaths are gulped down ragged and desperate.*

And now, into the camp, the last of the soldiers were returning from their slaughter of Letherii. Faces drawn, expressions numbed – as if each soldier had but just awakened from a nightmare, one in which he or she – surprise – was the monster.

*She hardens them, for that is what she needs.*

The Adjunct spoke, 'Grub does not behave like a child who has lost his father.'

Lostara Yil snorted. 'The lad is addled, Adjunct. You saw him dance. You heard him singing about candles.'

'Addled. Yes, perhaps.'

'In any case,' Lostara persisted, 'unlike Sinn, Grub has no talents, no way of knowing the fate of Fist Keneb. As for Sinn, well, as you know, I have little faith in her. Not because I believe her without power. She has that, Dryjhna knows.' Then she shrugged. 'Adjunct, they were on their own –

entirely on their own – for so long. Under strength to conduct a full-scale invasion.' She stopped then, realizing how critical all of this sounded. *And isn't it just that? A criticism of this, and of you, Adjunct. Didn't we abandon them?*

'I am aware of the views among the soldiers,' Tavore said, inflectionless.

'Adjunct,' Lostara said, 'we cannot conduct much of a siege, unless we use what sappers we have and most of our heavier munitions – I sense you're in something of a hurry and have no interest in settling in. When will the rest of the Perish and the Khundryl be joining us?'

'They shall not be joining us,' Tavore replied. 'We shall be joining them. To the east.'

*The other half of this campaign. Another invasion, then. Damn you, Adjunct, I wish you shared your strategies. With me. Hood, with anyone!* 'I have wondered,' she said, 'at the disordered response from the Tiste Edur and the Letherii.'

The Adjunct sighed, so low, so drawn out that Lostara Yil barely caught it. Then Tavore said, 'This empire is unwell. Our original assessment that the Tiste Edur were unpopular overseers was accurate. Where we erred, with respect to Fist Keneb's landing, was in not sufficiently comprehending the complexities of that relationship. The split has occurred, Captain. It just took longer.'

*At the expense of over a thousand marines.*

'Fist Keneb would not send a runner,' Tavore said. 'He would, in fact, lead his marines straight for Letheras. "First in, last out," as Sergeant Fiddler might say.'

'Last in, looking around,' Lostara said without thinking, then winced. 'Sorry, Adjunct—'

'The Bonehunters' motto, Captain?'

She would not meet her commander's eyes. 'Not a serious one, Adjunct. Coined by some heavy infantry soldier, I am told—'

'Who?'

She thought desperately. 'Nefarrias Bredd, I think.'

And caught, from the corner of her eye, a faint smile twitch Tavore's thin lips. Then it was gone and, in truth, might never have been.

'It may prove,' the Adjunct said, 'that Fist Keneb will earn us that ironic motto – those of us here, that is, in this camp.'

*A handful of marines to conquer an imperial capital?* 'Adjunct—'

'Enough. You will command for this night, Captain, as my representative. We march at dawn.' She turned. 'I must return to the *Froth Wolf*.'

'Adjunct?'

Tavore grimaced. 'Another argument with a certain weaponsmith and his belligerent wife.' Then she paused, 'Oh, when or if Sergeant Balm returns, I would hear his report.'

'Of course,' Lostara Yil replied. *If?*

She watched the Adjunct walk away, down towards the shore.

Aboard the *Froth Wolf,* Shurq Elalle leaned against the mainmast, her arms crossed, watching the three black, hairless, winged ape-like demons fighting over a shortsword. The scrap, a tumbling flurry of biting, scratching and countless inadvertent cuts and slices from the weapon itself, had migrated from the stern end of the mid-deck and was now climbing up onto the foredeck.

Sailors stood here and there, keeping well clear, and trading wagers on which demon would win out – an issue of some dispute since it was hard to tell the three beasts apart.

'—with the cut across the nose – wait, Mael's salty slick! Now another one's got the same cut! Okay, the one without—'

'—which one just lost that ear? Cut nose and missing ear, then!'

Close beside Shurq Elalle, a voice said, 'None of it's real, you know.'

She turned. 'Thought she had you chained below.'

'Who, the Adjunct? Why—'

'No. Your wife, Withal.'

The man frowned. 'That's how it looks, is it?'

'Only of late,' Shurq replied. 'She's frightened for you, I think.'

To that he made no response.

'A launch is returning,' Shurq observed, then straightened.

'I hope it's the Adjunct – I'm ready to leave your blessed company. No offence, Withal, but I'm nervous about my first mate and what he might be doing with the *Undying Gratitude*.'

The Meckros weaponsmith turned to squint out into the darkness of the main channel. 'Last I saw, he'd yet to drop anchor and was just sailing back and forth.'

'Yes,' Shurq said. 'Sane people pace in their cabin. Skorgen paces with the whole damned ship.'

'Why so impatient?'

'I expect he wants to tie up in Letheras well before this army arrives. And take on panicky nobles with all their worldly goods. Then we head back out before the Malazan storm, dump the nobles over the side and share out the spoils.'

'As any proper pirate would do.'

'Precisely.'

'Do you enjoy your profession, Captain? Does it not get stale after a time?'

'No, that's me who gets stale after a time. As for the profession, why yes, I do enjoy it, Withal.'

'Even throwing nobles overboard?'

'With all that money they should have paid for swimming lessons.'

'Belated financial advice.'

'Don't make me laugh.'

A sudden outcry from the sailors. On the foredeck, the demons had somehow managed to skewer themselves on the sword. The weapon pinned all three of them to the deck. The creatures writhed. Blood poured from their mouths, even as the bottom-most one began strangling from behind the one in the middle, who followed suit with the one on top. The demon in the middle began cracking the back of its head into the bottom demon's face, smashing its already cut nose.

Shurq Elalle turned away. 'Errant take me,' she muttered. 'I nearly lost it there.'

'Lost what?'

'You do not want to know.'

The launch arrived, thumping up against the hull, and moments later the Adjunct climbed into view. She cast a single glance over at the pinned demons, then nodded greeting to Shurq Elalle as she walked up to Withal.

'Is it time?' he asked.

'Almost,' she replied. 'Come with me.'

Shurq watched the two head below.

*Withal, you poor man. Now I'm frightened for you as well.*

*Damn, forgot to ask permission to leave.* She thought to follow them, then decided not to. *Sorry, Skorgen, but don't worry. We can always outsail a marching army. Those nobles aren't going anywhere, after all, are they?*

A short time later, while the sailors argued over who'd won what, the three nachts – who had been lying motionless as if dead – stirred and deftly extricated themselves from the shortsword. One of them kicked the weapon into the river, held its hands over its ears at the soft splash.

The three then exchanged hugs and caresses.

Amused and curious from where he sat with his back to a rail on the foredeck, Banaschar, the last Demidrek of the Worm of Autumn, continued watching. And was nevertheless caught entirely by surprise when the nachts swarmed over the side and a moment later there followed three distinct splashes.

He rose and went to the rail, looking down. Three vague heads bobbed on their way to the shore.

'Almost time,' he whispered.

Rautos Hivanar stared down at the crowded array of objects on the tabletop, trying once more to make sense of them. He had rearranged them dozens of times, sensing that there was indeed a pattern, somewhere, and could he but place the objects in their proper position, he would finally understand.

The artifacts had been cleaned, the bronze polished and gleaming. He had assembled lists of characteristics, seeking a typology, groupings based on certain details – angles of curvature, weight, proximity of where they had been found, even the various depths at which they had been buried.

For they had indeed been buried. Not tossed away, not thrown into a pit. No, each one had been set down in a hole sculpted into the clays – he had managed to create moulds of those depressions, which had helped him establish each object's cant and orientation.

The array before him now was positioned on the basis of spatial location, each set precisely in proper relation to the others – at least he believed so, based on his map. The only exception was with the second and third artifacts. The dig at that time – when the first three had been recovered – had not been methodical, and so the removal of the objects had destroyed any chance of precisely specifying their placement. And so it was two of these three that he now moved, again and again. Regarding the third one – the very first object found – he well knew where it belonged.

Meanwhile, outside the estate's high, well-guarded walls, the city of Letheras descended into anarchy.

Muttering under his breath, Rautos Hivanar picked up that first artifact. Studied its now familiar right angle bend, feeling its sure weight in his hands, and wondering anew at the warmth of the metal. Had it grown hotter in the last few days? He wasn't sure and had no real way of measuring such a thing.

Faint on the air in the room was the smell of smoke. Not woodsmoke, as might come from a hundred thousand cookfires, but the more acrid reek of burnt cloth and varnished furniture, along with – so very subtle – the sweet tang of scorched human flesh.

He had sent his servants to their beds, irritated with their endless reports, the fear in their meek eyes. Was neither hungry nor thirsty, and it seemed a new clarity was taking hold of his vision, his mind. The most intriguing detail of all was that he had now found twelve full-scale counterparts throughout the city; and each of these corresponded perfectly with the layout before him – excepting the two, of course. So, what he had on this table was a miniature map, and this, he knew, was important.

Perhaps the most important detail of all.

If he only knew why.

Yes, the object was growing warmer. Was it the same with its much larger companion, there in the back yard of his new inn?

He rose. No matter how late it was, he needed to find out. Carefully replacing the artifact onto the tabletop map, matching the position of the inn, he then made his way to his wardrobe.

The sounds of rioting in the city beyond had moved away, back into the poorer districts to the north. Donning a heavy cloak and collecting his walking stick – one that saw little use under normal circumstances, but there was now the possible need for self-protection – Rautos Hivanar left the room. Made his way through the silent house. Then outside, turning left, to the outer wall.

The guards standing at the side postern gate saluted.

'Any nearby trouble?' Rautos asked.

'Not of late, sir.'

'I wish to go out.'

The guard hesitated, then said, 'I will assemble an escort—'

'No no. I intend to be circumspect.'

'Sir—'

'Open the door.'

The guard complied.

Passing through, he paused in the narrow avenue, listening to the guard lock the door behind him. The smell of smoke was stronger here, a haze forming haloes round those few lamps still lit atop their iron poles. Rubbish lined the gutters, a most unpleasant detail evincing just how far all order and civil conduct had descended. Failure to keep the streets clean was symbolic of a moribund culture, a culture that had, despite loud and public exhortations to the contrary, lost its sense of pride, and its belief in itself.

When had this happened? The Tiste Edur conquest? No, that defeat had been but a symptom. The promise of anarchy, of collapse, had been whispered long before then. But so soft was that whisper that none heard it. *Ah, that is a lie. We were just unwilling to listen.*

He continued looking round, feeling a heavy lassitude settle on his shoulders.

*As with Letheras, so with empire.*

Rautos Hivanar set out, to walk a dying city.

Five men meaning no good were camped out in the old Tarthenal cemetery. Frowning, Ublala Pung strode out of the darkness and into their midst. His fists flew. A few moments later he was standing amidst five motionless bodies. He picked up the first one and carried it to the pit left behind by a huge fallen tree, threw it in the sodden hole. Then went back for the others.

A short time later he stamped out the small fire and began clearing a space, pulling grass, tossing stones. He went down on his knees to tug loose

the smaller weeds, and slowly crawled in an expanding spiral.

Overhead, the hazy moon was still on the rise, and somewhere to the north buildings burned. He needed to be done by dawn. The ground cleared, a wide, circular space of nothing but bared earth. It could be lumpy. That was all right, and it was good that it was all right since cemeteries were lumpy places.

Hearing a moan from the hole where the tree had been, Ublala rose, brushed the dirt from his knees and then his hands, and walked over. Edging down into the pit, he stared at the grey forms until he figured out which one was coming round. Then he crouched and punched the man in the head a few more times, until the moaning stopped. Satisfied, he returned to his clearing.

By dawn, yes.

Because at dawn, Ublala Pung knew, the Emperor would lift his cursed sword, and standing across from him, on that arena floor, would be Karsa Orlong.

In a secret chamber – what had once been a tomb of some kind – Ormly, the Champion Rat Catcher, sat down opposite an enormously fat woman. He scowled. 'You don't need that down here, Rucket.'

'True,' she replied, 'but I've grown used to it. You would not believe the power being huge engenders. The intimidation. You know, when things finally get better and there's plenty of food to be had again, I'm thinking of doing this for real.'

'But that's just my point,' Ormly replied, leaning forward. 'It's all padding and padding don't weigh anything like the real thing. You'll get tired walking across a room. Your knees will hurt. Your breaths will get shorter because the lungs can't expand enough. You'll get stretch marks even though you've never had a baby—'

'So if I get pregnant too then it'll be all right?'

'Except for all that other stuff, why yes, I suppose it would. Not that anybody could tell.'

'Ormly, you are a complete idiot.'

'But good at my job.'

To that, Rucket nodded. 'And so? How did it go?'

Ormly squinted across at her, then scratched his stubbly jaw. 'It's a problem.'

'Serious?'

'Serious.'

'How serious?'

'About as serious as it can get.'

'Hmmm. No word from Selush?'

'Not yet. And you're right, we'll have to wait for that.'

'But our people are in the right place, yes? No trouble with all the riots and such?'

'We're good on that count, Rucket. Hardly popular sites, are they?'

'So has there been any change in the time of execution?'

Ormly shrugged. 'We'll see come dawn, assuming any criers are still working. I sure hope not, Rucket. Even as it is, we may fail. You do know that, don't you?'

She sighed. 'That would be tragic. No, heartbreaking.'

'You actually love him?'

'Oh, I don't know. Hard not to, really. I'd have competition, though.'

'That scholar? Well, unless they're in the same cell, I don't think you need worry.'

'Like I said, you're an idiot. Of course I'm worrying, but not about competition. I'm worried for him. I'm worried for her. I'm worried that all

this will go wrong and Karos Invictad will have his triumph. We're running out of time.'

Ormly nodded.

'So, do you have any good news?' she asked.

'Not sure if it's good but it's interesting.'

'What?'

'Ublala Pung's gone insane.'

Rucket shook her head. 'Not possible. He hasn't enough brains to go insane.'

'Well, he beat up five scribers hiding out from the riots in the Tarthenal cemetery, and now he's crawling around on his hands and knees and pinching weeds.'

'So what's all that about?'

'No idea, Rucket.'

'He's gone insane.'

'Impossible.'

'I know,' she replied.

They sat in silence for a time, then Rucket said, 'Maybe I'll just keep the padding. That way I can have it without all the costs.'

'Is it real padding?'

'Illusions and some real stuff, kind of a patchwork thing.'

'And you think he'll fall in love with you looking like that? I mean, compared to Janath who's probably getting skinnier by the moment which, as you know, some men like since it makes their women look like children or some other ghastly secret truth nobody ever admits out loud—'

'He's not one of those.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am.'

'Well, I suppose you would know.'

'I would,' she replied. 'Anyway, what you're talking about is making me feel kind of ill.'

'Manly truths will do that,' Ormly said.

They sat. They waited.

Ursto Hoobutt and his wife and sometime lover Pinosel clambered onto the muddy bank. In Ursto's gnarled hands was a huge clay jug. They paused to study the frozen pond that had once been Settle Lake, the ice gleaming in the diffuse moonlight.

'It's melting, Cherrytart,' he said.

'Well you're just getting smarter day by day, dearie. We knowed it was melting. We knowed that a long time coming. We knowed it sober and we knowed it drunk.' She lifted her hamper. 'Now, we looking at a late supper or are we looking at an early breakfast?'

'Let's stretch it out and make it both.'

'Can't make it both. One or the other and if we stretch it out it'll be neither so make up your mind.'

'What's got you so touchy, love?'

'It's melting, dammit, and that means ants at the picnic.'

'We knew it was coming—'

'So what? Ants is ants.'

They settled down onto the bank, waving at mosquitoes. Ursto unstoppered the jug as Pinosel unwrapped the hamper. He reached for a tidbit and she slapped his hand away. He offered her the jug and she scowled, then accepted it. With her hands full, he snatched the tidbit then leaned back, content as he popped the morsel into his mouth.

Then gagged. 'Errant's ear, what is this?'

'That was a clay ball, love. For the scribing. And now, we're going to have to dig us up some more. Or, you are, since it was you who ate the one we had.'

'Well, it wasn't all bad, really. Here, give me that jug so's I can wash it down.'

A pleasant evening, Ursto reflected somewhat blearily, to just sit and watch a pond melt.

At least until the giant demon trapped in the ice broke loose. At that disquieting thought, he shot his wife and sometime lover a glance, remembering the day long ago when they'd been sitting here, all peaceful and the like, and she'd been on at him to get married and he'd said – oh well, he'd said it and now here they were and that might've been the Errant's nudge but he didn't think so.

No matter what the Errant thought.

'I seen that nostalgic look in your eyes, hubby-bubby. What say we have a baby?'

Ursto choked a second time, but on nothing so prosaic as a ball of clay.

The central compound of the Patriotists, the Lether Empire's knotted core of fear and intimidation, was under siege. Periodically, mobs heaved against the walls, rocks and jugs of oil with burning rag wicks sailing over to crash down in the compound. Flames had taken the stables and four other outbuildings three nights past, and the terrible sound of screaming horses had filled the smoky air. It had been all the trapped Patriotists could do to keep the main block from catching fire.

Twice the main gate had been breached, and a dozen agents had died pushing the frenzied citizens back. Now an enormous barricade of rubble, charred beams and furniture blocked the passage. Through the stench and sooty puddles of the compound, figures walked, armoured as soldiers might be and awkward in the heavy gear. Few spoke, few met the eyes of others,

in dread of seeing revealed the haunted, stunned disbelief that resided in their own souls.

The world did not work like this. The people could always be cowed, the ringleaders isolated and betrayed with a purse of coin or, failing that, quietly removed. But the agents could not set out into the streets to twist the dark deals. There were watchers, and gangs of thugs nearby who delighted in beating hapless agents to death, then flinging their heads back over the wall. And whatever operatives remained at large in the city had ceased all efforts at communicating – either had gone into hiding or were dead.

The vast network had been torn apart.

If it had been simple, Tanal Yathvanar knew, if it had been as easy as negotiating the release of prisoners according to the demands of the mob, then order could be restored. But those people beyond the compound wall were not friends and relatives of the scores of scholars, intellectuals and artists still locked up in the cells below. They didn't care a whit about the prisoners and would be just as happy to see them all burn along with the main block. So there was no noble cause to all of this. It was, he now understood, nothing but bloodlust.

*Is it any wonder we were needed? To control them. To control their baser instincts. Now look what has happened.* He stood near the front door, watching the pike-wielding agents patrolling the filthy compound. A number of times, in fact, they'd heard shouted demands for Tehol Beddict. The mob wanted him for themselves. They wanted to tear him to pieces. The Grand Drowning at dusk on the morrow was not enough to appease their savage need.

But there would be no releasing Tehol Beddict. Not as long as Karos Invictad remained in charge.

*Yet, if we gave him up, they might all calm down and go away. And we could begin again. Yes. Were I in charge, they could have Tehol Beddict, with my blessing.*

*But not Janath. Oh no, she is mine. For ever now.* He had been shocked to discover that she had few memories of her previous incarceration, but he

had taken great pleasure in re-educating her. *Ha, re-educating the teacher. I like that one.* At least Karos Invictad had been generous there, giving her to him. And now she resided in a private cell, chained to a bed, and he made use of her day and night. Even when the crowds raged against the walls and agents were dying keeping them out, he would lie atop her and have his way. And she'd fast learned to say all the right things, how to beg for more, whispering her undying desire (no, he would not force her to speak of love, because that word was dead now between them. For ever dead) until those words of desire became real for her.

The attention. The end to loneliness. She had even cried out the last time, cried out his name as her back arched and her limbs thrashed against the manacles.

Cried out for him: Tanal Yathvanar, who even as a child had known he was destined for greatness – for was that not what they all told him, over and over again? Yes, he had found his perfect world, at last. And what had happened? The whole damned city had collapsed, threatening all he now possessed.

All because of Karos Invictad. Because he refused to hand over Tehol Beddict and spent all his waking time staring into a small wooden box at a two-headed insect that had – hah – outwitted him in its dim, obstinate stupidity. *There is a truth hidden in that, isn't there? I'm certain of it. Karos and his two-headed insect, going round and round and round and so it will go until it dies. And when it does, the great Invigilator will go mad.*

But he now suspected he would not be able to wait for that. The mob was too hungry.

Beyond the walls there was quiet, for the moment, but something vast and thousand-headed was seething on the other side of Creeper Canal, and would soon cross over from Far Reaches and make its way down to North Tiers. He could hear its heavy susurration, a tide in the darkness pouring down streets, gushing into and out of alleys, spreading bloody and black into avenues and lanes. He could smell its hunger in the bitter smoke.

*And it comes for us, and it will not wait. Not even for Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists, the wealthiest man in all the empire.*

He allowed himself a soft laugh, then he turned about and entered the main block. Down the dusty corridor, walking unmindful over crusted streaks left behind when the wounded and dying had been dragged inside. The smell of stale sweat, spilled urine and faeces – as bad as the cells below – *and yes, are we not prisoners now, too? With bare scraps for food and well water fouled with ashes and blood. Trapped here with a death sentence hanging round our necks with the weight of ten thousand docks, and nothing but deep water on all sides.*

Another thought to amuse him; another thought to record in his private books.

Up the stairs now, his boots echoing on the cut limestone, and into the corridor leading to the Invigilator's office, Karos Invictad's sanctum. *His own private cell.* No guards in the passage – Karos no longer trusted them. In fact, he no longer trusted anyone. *Except me. And that will prove his greatest error.*

Reaching the door he pushed it open without knocking and stepped inside, then halted.

The room stank, and its source was sprawled in the chair opposite the Invigilator and his desk.

Tehol Beddict. Smeared in filth, cut and scabbed and bruised – Karos Invictad's prohibition against such treatment was over, it seemed.

'I have a guest,' the Invigilator snapped. 'You were not invited, Tanal Yathvanar. Furthermore, I did not hear you knock, yet another sign of your growing insolence.'

'The mob will attack again,' Tanal said, eyes flicking to Tehol. 'Before dawn. I thought it best to inform you of our weakened defences. We have but fourteen agents remaining still able to defend us. This time, I fear, they will break through.'

'Fame is murderous,' Tehol Beddict said through split lips. 'I hesitate in recommending it.'

Karos Invictad continued glaring at Tanal for a moment longer, then he said, 'In the hidden room – yes, you know of it, I'm aware, so I need not provide any more details – in the hidden room, then, Tanal, you will find a large chest filled with coins. Stacked beside it are a few hundred small cloth bags. Gather the wounded and have them fill sacks with coins. Then deliver them to the agents at the walls. They will be their weapons tonight.'

'That could turn on you,' Tehol observed, beating Tanal Yathvanar to the thought, 'if they conclude there's more still inside.'

'They'll be too busy fighting each other to conclude anything,' Karos said dismissively. 'Now, Tanal, if there is nothing else, go back to your sweet victim, who will no doubt plead desperately for your sordid attention.'

Tanal licked his lips. Was it time? Was he ready?

And then he saw, in the Invigilator's eyes, an absolute awareness, chilling Tanal's bones. *He read my mind. He knows my thoughts.*

Tanal quickly saluted, then hurried from the room. *How can I defeat such a man? He is ever ten steps ahead of me. Perhaps I should wait, until the troubles have passed, then make my move when he relaxes, when he feels most secure.*

He had gone to Invictad's office to confirm that the man remained alone with his puzzle. Whereupon he had planned to head down to the cells and collect Tehol Beddict. Bound, gagged and hooded, up and out into the compound. To appease the mob, to see them away and so save his own life. Instead, the Invigilator had Tehol in his very office.

*For what? A conversation? An extended gloat? Oh, each time I think I know that man . . .*

He found an agent and quickly conveyed Invictad's instruction, as well as directions to the once-hidden room. Then he continued on, only faintly aware of the irony in following the Invigilator's orders to the letter.

Onto a lower level, down another corridor, this one thicker with dust than most of the others, barring where his own boots had scraped an eager path. To the door, where he drew a key and unlocked the latch. Stepping inside.

'I knew you'd be lonely,' he said.

The lantern's wick had almost burned down and he went over to the table where it sat. 'Thirsty? I'm sure you are.' He glanced over his shoulder and saw her watching him, saw the desire in her eyes. 'There's more trouble in the city, Janath. But I will protect you. I will always protect you. You are safe. You do understand that, yes? For ever safe.'

She nodded, and he saw her spread her legs wider on the bed, then invite him with a thrust of her pelvis.

And Tanal Yathvanar smiled. He had his perfect woman.

Karos Invictad regarded Tehol Beddict from above steepled fingers. 'Very close,' he said after a time.

Tehol, who had been staring dazedly at the puzzle box on the desk, stirred slightly then looked up with his mismatched eyes.

'Very close,' Karos repeated. 'The measure of your intelligence, compared with mine. You are, I believe, the closest to my equal of any man I have met.'

'Really? Thank you.'

'I normally do not express my admiration for intelligence in others. Primarily because I am surrounded by idiots and fools—'

'Even idiots and fools need supreme leaders,' Tehol cut in, then smiled, then winced as cuts opened on his lips, then smiled more broadly than before.

'Attempts at humour, alas,' Karos said with a sigh, 'poorly disguise the deficiencies of one's intelligence. Perhaps that alone is what distinguishes the two of us.'

Tehol's smile faded and suddenly he looked dismayed. 'You never attempt humour, Invigilator?'

'The mind is capable of playing countless games, Tehol Beddict. Some are useful. Others are worthless, a waste of time. Humour is a prime example of the latter.'

'Funny.'

'Excuse me?'

'Oh, sorry, I was just thinking. Funny.'

'What is?'

'You wouldn't get it, alas.'

'You actually imagine yourself brighter than me?'

'I have no idea regarding that. But, since you abjure all aspects of humour, anything I might consider and then observe with the word "funny" is obviously something you would not understand.' Tehol then leaned slightly forward. 'But wait, that's just it!'

'What nonsense are you—'

'It's why I am, after all, much smarter than you.'

Karos Invictad smiled. 'Indeed. Please, do explain yourself.'

'Why, without a sense of humour, you are blind to so much in this world. To human nature. To the absurdity of so much that we say and do. Consider this, a most poignant example: a mob approaches, seeking my head because I stole all their money, and what do you do to appease them? Why, throw them all the money *you've* stolen from them! And yet, it's clear that you were completely unaware of just how hilarious that really is – you made your decision unmindful of what, eighty per cent of its delicious nuances. Ninety per cent! Ninety-three per cent! And a half or just shy of a half, but more than a third but less than . . . oh, somewhere close to a half, then.'

Karos Invictad waggled a finger. 'Incorrect, I'm afraid. It is not that I was unmindful. It is that I was indifferent to such nuances, as you call them.

They are, in fact, entirely meaningless.'

'Well, you may have a point there, since you seem capable of being appreciative of your own brilliance despite your ignorance. But let's see, perhaps I can come up with another example.'

'You are wasting your time, Tehol Beddict. And mine.'

'I am? It didn't seem you were very busy. What is so occupying you, Invigilator? Apart from anarchy in the streets, economic collapse, invading armies, dead agents and burning horses, I mean.'

The answer was involuntary, as Karos Invictad's eyes flicked down to the puzzle box. He corrected himself – but too late, for he saw a dawning realization in Tehol's bruised face, and the man leaned yet farther forward in his chair.

'What's this, then? Some magic receptacle? In which will be found all the solutions to this troubled world? Must be, to so demand all of your formidable genius. Wait, is something moving in there?'

'The puzzle is nothing,' Karos Invictad said, waving one bejewelled hand. 'We were speaking of your failings.'

Tehol Beddict leaned back, grimacing. 'Oh, *my* failings. Was that the topic of this sizzling discourse? I'm afraid I got confused.'

'Some puzzles have no solution,' Karos said, and he could hear how his own voice had grown higher-pitched. He forced himself to draw a deep breath, then said in a lower tone, 'Someone sought to confound me. Suggesting that a solution was possible. But I see now that no solution was ever possible. The fool did not play fair, and I so dislike such creatures and could I find him or her I would make an immediate arrest, and this entire building would echo with the fool's screams and shrieks.'

Karos paused when he saw Tehol frowning at him. 'What is it?'

'Nothing. Funny, though.'

The Invigilator reached for his sceptre and lifted it from the desktop, pleased as ever with the solid weight of the symbol, how it felt in his hand.

'Okay, not funny. Sorry I said anything. Don't hit me with that thing again. Please. Although,' Tehol added, 'considering it's the symbol of your office, hitting me with it, while somewhat heavy-handed, is nevertheless somewhat . . . funny.'

'I am thinking of giving you over to the citizens of Letheras,' Karos said, glancing up to gauge how the man would react to that statement. And was surprised to see the fool smiling again. 'You think I jest?'

'Never. Obviously.'

'Then you would enjoy being torn apart by the mob?'

'I doubt it. But then, I wouldn't be, would I? Torn apart, I mean.'

'Oh, and why not?'

'Because, not only do I have more money than you, Invigilator, I am – unlike you – entirely indifferent regarding who ends up owning it. Hand me over, by all means, sir. And watch me buy my life.'

Karos Invictad stared at the man.

Tehol wagged a broken finger. 'People with no sense or appreciation of humour, Invigilator, always take money too seriously. Its possession, anyway. Which is why they spend all their time stacking coins, counting this and that, gazing lovingly over their hoards and so on. They're compensating for the abject penury everywhere else in their lives. Nice rings, by the way.'

Karos forced himself to remain calm in the face of such overt insults. 'I said I was thinking of handing you over. Alas, you have just given me reason not to. So, you assure your own Drowning come the morrow. Satisfied?'

'Well, if my satisfaction is essential, then might I suggest—'

'Enough, Tehol Beddict. You no longer interest me.'

'Good, can I go now?'

'Yes.' Karos rose, tapping the sceptre onto one shoulder. 'And I, alas, must needs escort you.'

'Good help is hard to keep alive these days.'

'Stand up, Tehol Beddict.'

The man had some difficulty following that instruction, but the Invigilator waited, having learned to be patient with such things.

As soon as Tehol fully straightened, however, a look of astonishment lit his features. 'Why, it's a two-headed insect! Going round and round!'

'To the door now,' Karos said.

'What's the challenge?'

'It is pointless—'

'Oh now, really, Invigilator. You claim to be smarter than me, and I'm about to die – I like puzzles. I design them, in fact.

Very difficult puzzles.'

'You are lying. I know all the designers and you do not number among them.'

'Well, all right. I designed just one.'

'Too bad, then, you will be unable to offer it to me, for my momentary pleasure, since you are now returning to your cell.'

'That's all right,' Tehol replied. 'It was more of a joke than a puzzle, anyway.'

Karos Invictad grimaced, then waved Tehol towards the door with the sceptre.

As he slowly shuffled over, Tehol said, 'I figured out the challenge, anyway. It's to make the bug stop going round and round.'

The Invigilator blocked him with the sceptre. 'I told you, there is no solution.'

'I think there is. I think I know it, in fact. Tell you what, sir. I solve that puzzle there on your desk and you postpone my Drowning. Say, by forty years or so.'

'Agreed. Because you cannot.' He watched Tehol Beddict walk like an old man over to the desk. Then lean over. 'You cannot touch the insect!'

'Of course,' Tehol replied. And leaned yet farther over, lowering his face towards the box.

Karos Invictad hurried forward to stand beside him. 'Do not touch!'

'I won't.'

'The tiles can be rearranged, but I assure you—'

'No need to rearrange the tiles.'

Karos Invictad found his heart pounding hard in his chest. 'You are wasting more of my time.'

'No, I'm putting an end to your wasting your time, sir.' He paused, cocked his head. 'Probably a mistake. Oh well.'

And lowered his face down directly over the box, then gusted a sharp breath against one of the tiles. Momentarily clouding it. And the insect, with one of its heads facing that suddenly opaque, suddenly non-reflective surface, simply stopped. Reached up a leg and scratched its abdomen. As the mist cleared on the tile, it scratched once more, then resumed its circling.

Tehol straightened. 'I'm free! Free!'

Karos Invictad could not speak for ten, fifteen heartbeats. His chest was suddenly tight, sweat beading on his skin, then he said in a rasp, 'Don't be a fool.'

'You lied? Oh, I can't believe how you lied to me! Well then, piss on you and your pissy stupid puzzle, too!'

The Invigilator's sceptre swept in an arc, intersecting with that box on the desk, shattering it, sending its wreckage flying across the room. The insect

struck a wall and stayed there, then it began climbing towards the ceiling.

'*Run!* ' whispered Tehol Beddict. '*Run!* '

The sceptre swung next into Tehol's chest, snapping ribs.

'Pull the chain tighter on my ankles,' Janath said. 'Force my legs wider.'

'You enjoy being helpless, don't you?'

'Yes. Yes!'

Smiling, Tanal Yathvanar knelt at the side of the bed.

The chain beneath ran through holes in the bed frame at each corner. Pins held the lengths in place. To tighten the ones snaring her ankles all he needed to do was pull a pin on each side at the foot of the bed, drawing the chain down as far as he could, and, as he listened to her moans, replace the pins.

Then he rose and sat down on the edge of the bed. Stared down at her. Naked, most of the bruises fading since he no longer liked hurting her. A beautiful body indeed, getting thinner which he preferred in his women. He reached out, then drew his hand away again. He didn't like any touching until he was ready. She moaned a second time, arching her back.

Tanal Yathvanar undressed. Then he crawled up onto the bed, loomed over her with his knees between her legs, his hands pressing down on the mattress to either side of her chest.

He saw how the manacles had torn at her wrists. He would need to treat that – those wounds were looking much worse.

Slowly, Tanal settled onto her body, felt her shiver beneath him as he slid smoothly inside. So easy, so welcoming. She groaned, and, studying her face, he said, 'Do you want me to kiss you now?'

'*Yes!* '

And he brought his head down as he made his first deep thrust.

Janath, once eminent scholar, had found in herself a beast, prodded awake as if from a slumber of centuries, perhaps millennia. A beast that understood captivity, that understood that, sometimes, what needed doing entailed excruciating pain.

Beneath the manacles on her wrists, mostly hidden by scabs, blood and torn shreds of skin, the very bones had been worn down, chipped, cracked. By constant, savage tugging. Animal rhythm, blind to all else, deaf to every scream of her nerves. Tugging, and tugging.

Until the pins beneath the frame began to bend. Ever so slowly, bending, the wood holes chewed into, the pins bending, gouging through the holes.

And now, with the extra length of chain that came when Tanal Yathvanar had reset the pins at the foot of the bed frame, she had enough slack.

To reach with her left hand and grasp a clutch of his hair. To push his head to the right, where she had, in a clattering blur, brought most of the length of the chain through the hole, enough to wrap round his neck and then twist her hand down under and then over; and in sudden, excruciating determination, she pulled her left arm up, higher and higher with that arm – the manacle and her right wrist pinned to the frame, tugged down as far as it could go.

He thrashed, sought to dig his fingers under the chain, and she reached ever harder, her face brushing his own, her eyes seeing the sudden blue hue of his skin, his bulging eyes and jutting tongue.

He could have beaten against her. He could have driven his thumbs into her eyes. He could probably have killed her in time to survive all of this. But she had waited for his breath to release, which ever came at the moment he pushed in his first thrust. That breath, that she had heard a hundred times now, close to her ear, as he made use of her body, that breath is what killed him.

He needed air. He had none. Nothing else mattered. He tore at his own throat to get his fingers under the chain. She pushed her left arm straight, elbow locking, and loosed her own scream as the manacle round her right wrist shifted as a bolt slipped down into the hole.

That blue, bulging face, that flooding burst from his penis, followed by the hot gush of urine.

Staring eyes, veins blossoming red, then purple until the whites were completely filled.

She looked right into them. Looked into, seeking his soul, seeking to lock her gaze with that pathetic, vile, dying soul.

*I kill you. I kill you. I kill you!*

The beast's silent words.

The beast's gleeful, savage assertion. Her eyes shouted it at him, shouted it into his soul.

*Tanal Yathvanar. I kill you!*

Taralack Veed spat into his hands, rubbed them together to spread out the phlegm, then raised them and swept his hair back. 'I smell more smoke,' he said.

Senior Assessor, who sat opposite him at the small table, raised his thin brows. 'It surprises me that you can smell anything, Taralack Veed.'

'I have lived in the wild, Cabalhii. I can follow an antelope's spore that's a day old. This city is crumbling. The Tiste Edur have left. And suddenly the Emperor changes his mind and slaughters all the challengers until but two remain. And does anyone even care?' He rose suddenly and walked to the bed, on which he had laid out his weapons. He unsheathed his scimitar and peered down at the edge once again.

'You could trim your eyelashes with that sword by now.'

'Why would I do that?' Taralack asked distractedly.

'Just a suggestion, Gral.'

'I was a servant of the Nameless Ones.'

'I know,' Senior Assessor replied.

Taralack turned, studied with narrowed eyes the soft little man with his painted face. 'You do?'

'The Nameless Ones are known in my homeland. Do you know why they are called that? I will tell you as I see that you do not. The Initiated must surrender their names, in the belief that to know oneself by one's own name is to give it too much power. The name becomes the identity, becomes the face, becomes the self. Remove the name and power returns.'

'They made no such demands of me.'

'Because you are little more than a tool, no different from that sword in your hands. Needless to say, the Nameless Ones do not give names to their tools. And in a very short time you will have outlived your usefulness—'

'And I will be free once more. To return home.'

'Home,' mused Senior Assessor. 'Your tribe, there to right all your wrongs, to mend all the wounds you delivered in your zealous youth. You will come to them with wizened eyes, with slowed heart and a gentling hand. And one night, as you lie sleeping in your furs in the hut where you were born, someone will slip in and slide a blade across your throat. Because the world within your mind is not the world beyond. You are named Taralack Veed and they have taken of its power. From the name, the face. From the name, the self, and with it all the history, and so by your own power – so freely given away long, long ago – you are slain.'

Taralack Veed stared, the scimitar trembling in his hands. 'And this, then, is why you are known only as Senior Assessor.'

The Cabalhii shrugged. 'The Nameless Ones are fools for the most part. Said proof to be found in your presence here, with your Jhag companion. Even so, we share certain understandings, which is not too surprising, since we both came from the same civilization. From the First Empire of Dessimbelackis.'

'It was a common joke in Seven Cities,' the Gral said, sneering. 'One day the sun will die and one day there will be no civil war in the Cabal Isles.'

'Peace has at long last been won,' Senior Assessor replied, folding his hands together on his lap.

'Then why does every conversation I have with you of late make me want to throttle you?'

The Cabalhii sighed. 'Perhaps I have been away from home too long.'

Grimacing, Taralack Veed slammed the scimitar back in its scabbard.

From the corridor beyond a door thumped open and the two men in the room stiffened, their gazes meeting.

Soft footsteps, passing the door.

With a curse Taralack began strapping on his weapons. Senior Assessor rose, adjusting his robe before heading to the door and opening it just enough to peer outside. Then he ducked back in. 'He is on his way,' he said in a whisper.

Nodding, Taralack joined the monk who opened the door a second time. They went out into the corridor, even as they heard the sound of a momentary scuffle, then a grunt, after which something crunched on the stone floor.

Taralack Veed in the lead, they padded quickly down the corridor.

At the threshold of the practice yard's door was a crumpled heap – the guard. From the compound beyond there was a startled shout, a scuffle, then the sound of the outer gate opening.

Taralack Veed hurried out into the darkness. His mouth was dry. His heart pounded heavy in his chest. Senior Assessor had said that Icarium would not wait. That Icarium was a god and no-one could hold back a god, when it had set out to do what it would do. *They will find him gone. Will they search the city? No, they do not even dare unbar the palace gate.*

*Icarium? Lifestealer, what do you seek?*

*Will you return to stand before the Emperor and his cursed sword?*

The monk had told Taralack to be ready, to not sleep this night. *And this is why.*

They reached the gate, stepped over the bodies of two guards, then edged outside.

And saw him, standing motionless forty paces down the street, in its very centre. A group of four figures, wielding clubs, were converging on him. At ten paces away they halted, then began backing away. Then they whirled about and ran, one of the clubs clattering on the cobbles.

Icarium stared up at the night sky.

Somewhere to the north, three buildings were burning, reflecting lurid crimson on the bellies of the clouds of smoke seething overhead. Distant screams lifted into the air. Taralack Veed, his breath coming in gasps, drew out his sword. Thugs and murderers might run from Icarium, but that was no assurance that they would do the same for himself and the monk.

Icarium lowered his gaze, then looked about, as if only now discovering where he was. Another moment's pause, then he set out.

Silent, the Gral and the Cabalhii followed.

Samar Dev licked dry lips. He was lying on his bed, apparently asleep. And come the dawn, he would take his flint sword, strap on his armour, and walk in the midst of Letherii soldiers to the Imperial Arena. And he would walk, alone, out onto the sand, the few hundred onlookers on the marble benches raising desultory hooting and catcalls. There would be no bet-takers, no frenzied shouting of odds. Because this game always ended the same. And now, did anyone even care?

In her mind she watched him stride to the centre of the arena. Would he be looking at the Emperor? Studying Rhulad Sengar as he emerged from the far gate? The lightness of his step, the unconscious patterns the sword made at the end of his hands, patterns that whispered of all that muscles and bones had learned and were wont to do?

*No, he will be as he always is. He will be Karsa Orlong. He'll not even look at the Emperor, until Rhulad draws closer, until the two of them begin.*

Not overconfident. Not indifferent. Not even contemptuous. No easy explanations for this Toblakai warrior. He would be within himself, entirely within himself, until it was time . . . *to witness*.

But nothing would turn out right, Samar Dev knew. Not all of Karsa Orlong's prowess, nor that ever-flooding, ever-cascading torrent that was the Toblakai's will; nor even this host of spirits trapped in the knife she now held, and those others who trailed the Toblakai's shadow – souls of the slain, desert godlings and ancient demons of the sands and rock – spirits that might well burst forth, enwreathing their champion god (and was he truly that? A god? She did not know) with all their power. No, none of it would matter in the end.

Kill Rhulad Sengar. Kill him thrice. Kill him a dozen times. *In the end he will stand, sword bloodied, and then will come Icarium, the very last.*

*To begin it all again.*

Karsa Orlong, reduced to a mere name among the list of the slain. Nothing more than that. *For this extraordinary warrior. And this is what you whisper, Fallen One, as your holy credo. Grandness and potential and promise, they all break in the end.*

*Even your great champion, this terrible, tortured Tiste Edur – you see him broken again and again. You fling him back each time less than what he was, yet with ever more power in his hands. He is there, yes, for us all. The power and its broken wielder broken by his power.*

Karsa Orlong sat up. 'Someone has left,' he said.

Samar Dev blinked. 'What?'

He bared his teeth. 'Icarium. He is gone.'

'What do you mean, gone? *He's left?* To go where?'

'It does not matter,' the Toblakai replied, swinging round to settle his feet on the floor. He stared across at her. 'He knows.'

'Knows what, Karsa Orlong?'

The warrior stood, his smile broadening, twisting the crazed tattoos on his face. 'That he will not be needed.'

'Karsa—'

'You will know when, woman. You will know.'

*Know what, damn you?* 'They wouldn't have just let him go,' she said. 'So he must have taken down all the guards. Karsa, this is our last chance. To head out into the city. Leave all this—'

'You do not understand. The Emperor is nothing. The Emperor, Samar Dev, *is not the one he wants*.'

*Who? Icarium? No* – 'Karsa Orlong, what secret do you hold? What do you know about the Crippled God?'

The Toblakai rose. 'It is nearly dawn,' he said. 'Nearly time.'

'Karsa, please—'

'Will you witness?'

'Do I have to?'

He studied her for a moment, and then his next words shocked her to the core of her soul: 'I need you, woman.'

'*Why?*' she demanded, suddenly close to tears.

'To witness. To do what needs doing when the time comes.' He drew a deep, satisfied breath, looking away, his chest swelling until she thought his ribs would creak. 'I live for days like these,' he said.

And now she did weep.

*Grandness, promise, potential. Fallen One, must you so share out your pain?*

'Women always get weak once a month, don't they?'

'Go to Hood, bastard.'

'And quick to anger, too.'

She was on her feet. Pounding a fist into his solid chest.

Five times, six – he caught her wrist, not hard enough to hurt, but stopping those swings as if a manacle had snapped tight.

She glared up at him.

And he was, for *his* sake, not smiling.

Her fist opened and she found herself almost physically pulled up and into his eyes – seeing them, it seemed, for the first time. Their immeasurable depth, their bright ferocity and joy.

Karsa Orlong nodded. 'Better, Samar Dev.'

'You patronizing shit.'

He released her arm. 'I learn more each day about women. Because of you.'

'You still have a lot to learn, Karsa Orlong,' she said, turning away and wiping at her cheeks.

'Yes, and that is a journey I will enjoy.'

'I really should hate you,' she said. 'I'm sure most people who meet you hate you, eventually.'

The Toblakai snorted. 'The Emperor will.'

'So now I must walk with you. Now I must watch you die.'

From outside there came shouts.

'They have discovered the escape,' Karsa Orlong said, collecting his sword. 'Soon they will come for us. Are you ready, Samar Dev?'

'No.'

The water had rotted her feet, he saw. White as the skin of a corpse, shreds hanging loose to reveal gaping red wounds, and as she drew them onto the altar top and tucked them under her, the Errant suddenly understood

something. About humanity, about the seething horde in its cruel avalanche through history.

The taste of ashes filling his mouth, he looked away, studied the runnels of water streaming down the stone walls of the chamber. 'It rises,' he said, looking back at her.

'He was never as lost as he thought he was,' Feather Witch said, reaching up distractedly to twirl the filthy strands of her once-golden hair. 'Are you not eager, dear god of mine? This empire is about to kneel at your feet. And,' she suddenly smiled, revealing brown teeth, 'at mine.'

*Yes, at yours, Feather Witch. Those rotting, half-dead appendages that you could have used to run. Long ago. The empire kneels, and lips quiver forth. A blossom kiss. So cold, so like paste, and the smell, oh, the smell . . .*

'Is it not time?' she asked, with an oddly coy glance.

'For what?'

'You were a consort. You know the ways of love. Teach me now.'

'Teach you?'

'I am unbroken. I have never lain with man or woman.'

'A lie,' the Errant replied. 'Gribna, the lame slave in the Hiroth village. You were very young. He used you. Often and badly. It is what has made you what you now are, Feather Witch.'

And he saw her eyes shy away, saw the frown upon her brow, and realized the awful truth that she had not remembered. *Too young, too wide-eyed. And then, every moment buried in a deep hole at the pit of her soul. She, by the Abyss, did not remember.* 'Feather Witch—'

'Go away,' she said. 'I don't need anything from you right now. I have Udinaas.'

'You have lost Udinaas. You never had him. Listen, please—'

'He's alive! Yes he is! And all the ones who wanted him are dead – the sisters, all dead! Could you have imagined that?'

'You fool. Silchas Ruin is coming here. To lay this city to waste. To destroy it utterly—'

'He cannot defeat Rhulad Sengar,' she retorted. 'Not even Silchas Ruin can do that!'

The Errant said nothing to that bold claim. Then he turned away. 'I saw gangrene at your feet, Feather Witch. My temple, as you like to call it, reeks of rotting flesh.'

'Then heal me.'

'The water rises,' he said, and this time the statement seemed to burgeon within him, filling his entire being. *The water rises. Why?* 'Hannan Mosag seeks the demon god, the one trapped in the ice. That ice, Feather Witch, is melting. Water . . . everywhere. *Water* . . .'

By the Holds, was it possible? Even this? *But no, I trapped the bastard. I trapped him!*

'He took the finger,' Feather Witch said behind him. 'He took it and thought that was enough, to just take it. But how could I go where he has gone? I couldn't. So I needed him, yes. I needed him, and he was never as lost as he thought he was.'

'And what of the other one?' the Errant asked, still with his back to her.

'Never found—'

The Elder God whirled round. *'Where is the other finger?'*

He saw her eyes widen.

*Is it possible? Is it—*

He found himself in the corridor, the water at his hips, though he passed through it effortlessly. *We have come to the moment – Icarium walks – where? A foreign army and a horrifying mage approaches. Silchas Ruin wings down from the north with eyes of fire. Hannan Mosag – the fool – crawls his way to Settle Lake even as the demon god stirs – and she says he was never as lost as he thought he was.*

Almost dawn, somewhere beyond these sagging, weeping walls.

An empire on its knees.

The blossom kiss, but moments away.

The word came to Varat Taun, newly appointed Finadd in the Palace Guard, that Icarium, along with Taralack Veed and Senior Assessor, had escaped. At that statement his knees had weakened, a flood rushing through him, but it was a murky, confused flood. Relief, yes, at what had been averted – at least for the moment, for might Icarium not return? – relief that was quickly engulfed by his growing dread for this invading army encamped barely two leagues away.

There would be a siege, and with virtually no-one left to hold the walls it would be a short one. And then the Eternal Domicile itself would be assailed, and by the time all was done, Emperor Rhulad Sengar would likely be standing alone, surrounded by the enemy.

An Emperor without an empire.

Five Letherii armies on the Bolkando borderlands far to the east had seemingly vanished. Not a word from a single mage among those forces. They had set out, under a competent if not brilliant commander, to crush the Bolkando and their allies. That should have been well within the woman's capabilities. The last report had come half a day before the armies clashed.

What else could anyone conclude? *Those five armies were shattered. The enemy marches on, into the empire's very heart. And what has happened east of Drene? More silence, and Atri-Preda Bivatt was considered by most as the next Preda of the Imperial Armies.*

Rebellion in Bluerose, riots in every city. Wholesale desertion of entire units and garrisons. The Tiste Edur vanishing like ghosts, fleeing back to their homeland, no doubt. *By the Errant, why did I not ride with Yan Tovis? Return to my wife – I am a fool, who will die here, in this damned palace. Die for nothing.*

He stood, positioned beside the throne room's entranceway, and watched from under the rim of his helm the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths pace in

front of the throne. Filthy with blood and spilled fluids from a dozen dead challengers, a dozen cut through in a whirlwind frenzy, Rhulad shrieking as his sword whirled and chopped and severed and seemed to drink in the pain and blood of its victims.

And now, dawn was beginning on this day, and the sleepless Emperor paced. Blackened coins shifting on his ravaged face as emotions worked his features in endless cycles of disbelief, distress and fear.

Before Rhulad Sengar, standing motionless, was the Chancellor.

Thrice, the Emperor paused to glare at Triban Gnol. Thrice he made as if to speak, only to resume his pacing, the sword-tip dragging across the tiles.

His own people had abandoned him. He had inadvertently drowned his own mother and father. Killed all of his brothers. Driven the wife he had stolen to suicide. Been betrayed by the First and only Concubine he had possessed, Nisall.

An economy in ruins, all order crumbling, and armies invading.

And his only answer was to force hapless foreigners onto the sands of the arena and butcher them.

Pathos or grand comedy?

*It will not do, Emperor. All that blood and guts covering you will not do. When you are but the hands holding the sword, the sword rules, and the sword knows nothing but what it was made for. It can achieve no resolutions, can manage no subtle diplomacy, can solve none of the problems afflicting people in their tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands.*

*Leave a sword to rule an empire and the empire falls. Amidst war, amidst anarchy, amidst a torrent of blood and a sea of misery.*

Coin-clad, the wielder of the sword paced out the true extent of his domain, here in this throne room.

Halting, facing the Chancellor once more. 'What has happened?'

A child's question. A child's voice. Varat Taun felt his heart give slightly, felt its hardness suddenly soften. *A child*.

The Chancellor's reply was measured, so reassuring that Varat Taun very nearly laughed at the absurdity of that tone. 'We are never truly conquered, Emperor. You will stand, because none can remove you. The invaders will see that, understand that. They will have done with their retribution. Will they occupy? Unknown. If not them, then the coalition coming from the eastern kingdoms will – and such coalitions inevitably break apart, devour themselves. They too will be able to do nothing to you, Emperor.'

Rhulad Sengar stared at Triban Gnol, his mouth working but no sounds coming forth.

'I have begun,' the Chancellor resumed, 'preparing our conditional surrender. To the Malazans. At the very least, they will enforce peace in the city, an end to the riots. Likely working in consort with the Patriotists. Once order is restored, we can begin the task of resurrecting the economy, minting—'

'Where are my people?' Rhulad Sengar asked.

'They will return, Emperor. I am sure of it.'

Rhulad turned to face the throne. And suddenly went perfectly still. '*It is empty*,' he whispered. 'Look!' He spun round, pointing his sword back at the throne. 'Do you see? It is *empty*!'

'Sire—'

'Like my father's chair in our house! Our house in the village! Empty!'

'The village is no longer there, Emperor—'

'But the chair remains! I see it! With my own eyes – my father's chair! The paint fades in the sun. The wood joins split in the rain. Crows perch on the weathered arms! *I see it!* '

The shout echoed in silence then. Not a guard stirring.

The Chancellor with bowed head, and who knew what thoughts flickered behind the serpent's eyes?

*Surrender. Conditional. Rhulad Sengar remains. Rhulad Sengar and, oh yes, Chancellor Triban Gnol. And the Patriotists. 'We cannot be conquered. We are for ever. Step into our world and it devours you.'*

Rhulad's broad shoulders slowly sagged. Then he walked up to the throne, turned about and sat down. Looked out with bleak eyes. In a croaking voice he asked, 'Who remains?'

The Chancellor bowed. 'But one, Emperor.'

'One? There should be two.'

'The challenger known as Icarium has fled, Emperor. Into the city. We are hunting him down.'

*Liar.*

But Rhulad Sengar seemed indifferent, his head turning to one side, eyes lowering until they fixed on the gore-spattered sword. 'The Toblakai.'

'Yes, Emperor.'

'Who murdered Binadas. My brother.'

'Indeed, sire.'

The head slowly lifted. 'Is it dawn?'

'It is.'

Rhulad's command was soft as a breath. '*Bring him.*'

They let the poor fool go once he had shown them the recessed door leading under the city wall. It was, of course, locked, and while the rest of the squads waited in the slowly fading darkness – seeking whatever cover they could find and it wasn't much – Fiddler and Cuttle went down into the depression to examine the door.

'Made to be broken down,' Cuttle muttered, 'so it's like the lad said – we go in and then the floodgates open and we drown. Fid, I don't see a way to

do this, not quietly enough so as no-one hears and figures out we've taken the trap.'

Fiddler scratched at his white beard. 'Maybe we could dismantle the entire door, frame and all.'

'We ain't got the time.'

'No. We pull back and hide out for the day, then do it tomorrow night.'

'The Adjunct should be showing up by then. Keneb wants us first in and he's right, we've earned it.'

At that moment they heard a thump from behind the door, then the low scrape of the bar being lifted.

The two Malazans moved to either side, quickly cocking their crossbows.

A grinding sound, then the door was pushed open.

The figure that climbed into view was no Letherii soldier. It was wearing plain leather armour that revealed, without question, that it was a woman, and on her face an enamel mask with a modest array of painted sigils. Two swords strapped across her back. One stride, then two. A glance to Fiddler on her right, then to Cuttle on her left. Pausing, brushing dirt from her armour, then setting out. Onto the killing field, and away.

Bathed in sweat, Fiddler settled back into a sitting position, the crossbow trembling in his hands.

Cuttle made a warding gesture, then sat down as well. 'Hood's breath was on my neck, Fid. Right there, right then. I know, she didn't even reach for those weapons, didn't even twitch . . .'

'Aye,' Fid answered, the word whispered like a blessing. *A Hood-damned Seguleh. High ranked, too. We'd never have got our shots off – no way. Our heads would have rolled like a pair of oversized snowballs.*

'I looked away, Fid. I looked right down at the ground when she turned my way.'

'Me too.'

'And that's why we're still alive.'

'Aye.'

Cuttle turned and peered down into the dark tunnel. 'We don't have to wait till tomorrow night after all.'

'Go back to the others, Cuttle. Get Keneb to draw 'em up. I'm heading in to check the other end. If it's unguarded and quiet, well and good. If not . . .'

'Aye, Fid.'

The sergeant dropped down into the tunnel.

He moved through the dark as fast as he could without making too much noise. The wall overhead was damned thick and he'd gone thirty paces before he saw the grey blur of the exit at the end of a sharp slope. Crossbow in hands, Fiddler edged forward.

He need not have worried.

The tunnel opened into a cramped blockhouse with no ceiling. One bench lined the wall to his right. Three bodies were sprawled on the dusty stone floor, bleeding out from vicious wounds. *Should've averted your eyes, soldiers.* Assuming she even gave them the time to decide either way – she'd wanted out, after all.

The door opposite him was ajar and Fiddler crept to it, looked out through the crack. A wide street, littered with rubbish.

They'd been listening to the riots half the night, and it was clear that mobs had swept through here, if not this night then other nights. The garrison blocks opposite were gutted, the windows soot-stained. *Better and better.*

He turned round and hastened back down the tunnel.

At the other end he found Cuttle, Faradan Sort and Fist Keneb, all standing a few paces in from the door.

Fiddler explained to them what he had found. Then said, 'We got to go through right away, I think. Eight hundred marines to come through and that'll take a while.'

Keneb nodded. 'Captain Faradan Sort.'

'Sir.'

'Take four squads through and establish flanking positions. Send one squad straight across to the nearest barracks to see if they are indeed abandoned. If so, that will be our staging area. From there, I will lead the main body to the gate, seize and secure it. Captain, you and four squads will strike into the city, as far as you can go, causing trouble all the way – take extra munitions for that.'

'Our destination?'

'The palace.'

'Aye, sir. Fiddler, collect Gesler and Hellian and Urb – you're the first four – and take your squads through. At a damned run if you please.'

In the grey light of early dawn, four figures emerged from a smear of blurred light twenty paces from the dead Azath Tower behind the Old Palace. As the portal swirled shut behind them, they stood, looking round.

Hedge gave Quick Ben a light push to one side, somewhere between comradely affection and irritation. 'Told you, it's reunion time, wizard.'

'Where in Hood's name are we?' Quick Ben demanded.

'We're in Letheras,' Seren Pedac said. 'Behind the Old Palace – but something's wrong.'

Trull Sengar wrapped his arms about himself, his face drawn with the pain of freshly healed wounds, his eyes filled with a deeper distress.

Hedge felt some of his anticipation dim like a dying oil lamp as he studied the Tiste Edur. *The poor bastard. A brother murdered in front of his eyes. Then, the awkward goodbye with Onrack – joy and sadness there in plenty, seeing his old friend and the woman at his side – a woman Onrack had loved for so long. So long? Damned near incomprehensible, that's how long.*

But now – 'Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur slowly looked over.

Hedge shot Quick Ben a glance, then he said, 'We've a mind to escort you and Seren. To her house.'

'This city is assailed,' Trull Sengar said. 'My youngest brother – the Emperor—'

'That can all wait,' Hedge cut in. He paused, trying to figure out how to say what he meant, then said, 'Your friend Onrack stole a woman's heart, and it was all there. In her eyes, I mean. The answer, that is. And if you'd look, just look, Trull Sengar, into the eyes of Seren Pedac, well—'

'For Hood's sake,' Quick Ben sighed. 'He means you and Seren need to get alone before anything else, and we're going to make sure that happens. All right?'

The surprise on Seren Pedac's face was almost comical.

But Trull Sengar then nodded.

Hedge regarded Quick Ben once again. 'You recovered enough in case we walk into trouble?'

'Something your sharpers can't handle? Yes, probably. Maybe. Get a sharper in each hand, Hedge.'

'Good enough . . . since you're a damned idiot,' Hedge replied. 'Seren Pedac – you should know, I'm well envious of this Tiste Edur here, but anyway. Is your house far?'

'No, it is not, Hedge of the Bridgeburners.'

'Then let's get out of this spooky place.'

Silts swirled up round his feet, spun higher, engulfing his shins, then whirled away like smoke on the current. Strange pockets of luminosity drifted past, morphing as if subjected to unseen pressures in this dark, unforgiving world.

Bruthen Trana, who had been sent to find a saviour, walked an endless plain, the silts thick and gritty. He stumbled against buried detritus, tripped

on submerged roots. He crossed current-swept rises of hardened clay from which jutted polished bones of long-dead leviathans. He skirted the wreckage of sunken ships, the ribs of the hulls splayed out and cargo scattered about. And as he walked, he thought about his life and the vast array of choices he had made, others he had refused to make.

No wife, no single face to lift into his mind's eye. He had been a warrior for what seemed all his life. Fighting alongside blood kin and comrades closer than any blood kin. He had seen them die or drift away. He had, he realized now, watched his entire people pulled apart. With the conquest, with the cold-blooded, anonymous nightmare that was Lether. As for the Letherii themselves, no, he did not hate them. More like pity and yes, compassion, for they were as trapped in the nightmare as anyone else. The rapacious desperation, the gnawing threat of falling, of drowning beneath the ever-rising, ever-onrushing torrent that was a culture that could never look back, could not even slow its headlong plunge into some gleaming future that – if it came at all – would ever only exist for but a privileged few.

This eternal seabed offered its own commentary, and it was one that threatened to drag him down into the silts, enervated beyond all hope of continuing, of even moving. Cold, crushing, this place was like history's own weight – history not of a people or a civilization, but of the entire world.

Why was he still walking? What saviour could liberate him from all of this? He should have remained in Letheras. Free to launch an assault on Karos Invictad and his Patriotists, free to annihilate the man and his thugs. And then he could have turned to the Chancellor. Imagining his hands on Triban Gnol's throat was most satisfying – for as long as the image lasted, which was never long enough. A bloom of silts up into his eyes, another hidden object snagging his foot.

And here, now, looming before him, pillars of stone. The surfaces, he saw, cavorted with carvings, unrecognizable sigils so intricate they spun and shifted before his eyes.

As he drew closer, silts gusted ahead, and Bruthen Trana saw a figure climbing into view. Armour green with verdigris and furred with slime. A closed helm covering its face. In one gauntleted hand was a Letherii sword.

And a voice spoke in the Tiste Edur's head: *'You have walked enough, Ghost.'*

Bruthen Trana halted. 'I am not a ghost in truth—'

*'You are, stranger. Your soul has been severed from now cold, now rotting flesh. You are no more than what stands here, before me. A ghost.'*

Somehow, the realization did not surprise him. Hannan Mosag's legacy of treachery made all alliances suspect. And he had, he realized, felt . . . severed. For a long time, yes. The Warlock King likely did not waste any time in cutting the throat of Bruthen Trana's helpless body.

'Then,' he said, 'what is left for me?'

*'One thing, Ghost. You are here to summon him. To send him back.'*

'But was not his soul severed as well?'

*'His flesh and bones are here, Ghost. And in this place, there is power. For here you will find the forgotten gods, the last holding of their names. Know this, Ghost, were we to seek to defy you, to refuse your summoning, we could. Even with what you carry.'*

'Will you then refuse me?' Bruthen Trana asked, and if the answer was *yes*, then he would laugh. To have come all this way. To have sacrificed his life . . .

*'No. We understand the need. Better, perhaps, than you.'* The armoured warrior lifted his free hand. All but the foremost of the metal-clad fingers folded. '*Go there,'* it said, pointing towards a pillar. *'The side with but one name. Draw forth that which you possess of his flesh and bone. Speak the name so written on the stone.*'

Bruthen Trana walked slowly to the standing stone, went round to the side with the lone carving. And read thereon the name inscribed: ' "Brys Beddict, Saviour of the Empty Hold." I summon you.'

The face of the stone, cleaned here, seeming almost fresh, all at once began to ripple, then bulge in places, the random shapes and movement coalescing to create a humanoid shape, pushing out from the stone. An arm came free, then shoulder, then head, face – eyes closed, features twisted as if in pain – upper torso. A leg. The second arm – Bruthen saw that two fingers were missing on that hand.

He frowned. *Two?*

As the currents streamed, Brys Beddict was driven out from the pillar. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, was almost swallowed in billowing silts.

The armoured warrior arrived, carrying a scabbarded sword, which he pushed point-first into the seabed beside the Letherii.

*'Take it, Saviour. Feel the currents – they are eager. Go, you have little time.'*

Still on his hands and knees, head hanging, Brys Beddict reached out for the weapon. As soon as his hand closed about the scabbard a sudden rush of the current lifted the man from the seabed. He spun in a flurry of silts and then was gone.

Bruthen Trana stood, motionless. That current had rushed right through him, unimpeded. *As it would through a ghost.*

All at once he felt bereft. He'd not had a chance to say a word to Brys Beddict, to tell him what needed to be done. An Emperor, to cut down once more. An empire, to resurrect.

*'You are done here, Ghost.'*

Bruthen Trana nodded.

*'Where will you go?'*

'There is a house. I lost it. I would find it again.'

*'Then you shall.'*

'Oh, Padderunt, look! It's twitching!'

The old man squinted over at Selush through a fog of smoke. She was doing that a lot of late. Bushels of rustleaf ever since Tehol Beddict's arrest. 'You've dressed enough dead to know what the lungs of people who do too much of that look like, Mistress.'

'Yes. No different from anyone else's.'

'Unless they got the rot, the cancer.'

'Lungs with the rot all look the same and that is most certainly true. Now, did you hear what I said?'

'It twitched,' Padderunt replied, twisting in his chair to peer up at the bubbly glass jar on the shelf that contained a stubby little severed finger suspended in pink goo.

'It's about time, too. Go to Rucket,' Selush said between ferocious pulls on the mouthpiece, her substantial chest swelling as if it was about to burst. 'And tell her.'

'That it twitched.'

'Yes!'

'All right.' He set down his cup. 'Rustleaf tea, Mistress.'

'I'd drown.'

'Not inhaled. Drunk, in civil fashion.'

'You're still here, dear servant, and I don't like that at all.'

He rose. 'On my way, O enwreathed one.'

She had managed to push the corpse of Tanal Yathvanar to one side, and it now lay beside her as if cuddled in sleep, the bloated, blotched face next to her own.

There would be no-one coming for her. This room was forbidden to all but Tanal Yathvanar, and unless some disaster struck this compound in the next day or two, leading Karos Invictad to demand Tanal's presence and so seek him out, Janath knew it would be too late for her.

Chained to the bed, legs spread wide, fluids leaking from her. She stared up at the ceiling, strangely comforted by the body lying at her side. Its stillness, the coolness of the skin, the flaccid lack of resistance from the flesh. She could feel the shrivelled thing that was his penis pressing against her right thigh. And the beast within her was pleased.

She needed water. She needed that above all else. A mouthful would be enough, would give her the strength to once again begin tugging at the chains, dragging the links against the wood, dreaming of the entire frame splintering beneath her – but it would take a strong man to do that, she knew, strong and healthy. Her dream was nothing more than that, but she held on to it as her sole amusement that would, she hoped, follow her into death. Yes, right up until the last moment.

It would be enough.

Tanal Yathvanar, her tormentor, was dead. But that would be no escape from her. She meant to resume her pursuit, her soul – sprung free of this flesh – demonic in its hunger, in the cruelty it wanted to inflict on whatever whimpering, cowering thing was left of Tanal Yathvanar.

A mouthful of water. That would be so sweet.

She could spit it into the staring face beside her.

Coins to the belligerent multitude brought a larger, more belligerent multitude. And, at last, trepidation awoke in Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists. He sent servants down into the hiddenmost crypts below, to drag up chest after chest. In the compound his agents were exhausted, now simply flinging handfuls of coins over the walls since the small sacks were long gone. And a pressure was building against those walls that, it now seemed, no amount of silver and gold could relieve.

He sat in his office, trying to comprehend that glaring truth. Of course, he told himself, there were simply too many in the mob. Not enough coins was the problem. They'd fought like jackals over the sacks, had they not?

He had done and was doing what the Emperor should have done. Emptied the treasury and buried the people in riches. That would have purchased

peace, yes. An end to the riots. Everyone returning to their homes, businesses opening once more, food on the stalls and whores beckoning from windows and plenty of ale and wine to flow down throats – all the pleasures that purchased apathy and obedience. Yes, festivals and games and Drownings and that would have solved all of this. Along with a few quiet arrests and assassinations.

But he was running out of money. His money. Hard-won, a hoard amassed solely by his own genius. And they were taking it all.

Well, he would start all over again. Stealing it back from the pathetic bastards. Easy enough for one such as Karos Invictad.

Tanal Yathvanar had disappeared, likely hiding with his prisoner, and he could rot in her arms for all that the Invigilator cared. Oh, the man schemed to overthrow him, Karos knew. Pathetic, simplistic schemes. But they would come to naught, because the next time Karos saw the man, he would kill him. A knife through the eye. Quick, precise, most satisfying.

He could hear the shouts for Tehol Beddict, somewhat less fierce now – and that was, oddly enough, vaguely disturbing. Did they no longer want to tear him to pieces? Was he indeed hearing cries for the man's release?

Desperate knocking on his office door.

'Enter.'

An agent appeared, his face white. 'Sir, the main block—'

'Are we breached?'

'No—'

'Then go away – wait, check on Tehol Beddict. Make sure he's regained consciousness. I want him able to walk when we march to the Drownings.'

The man stared at him for a long moment, then he said, 'Yes sir.'

'Is that all?'

'No, the main block—' He gestured out into the corridor.

'What is it, you damned fool?'

'It's filling with rats, sir!'

*Rats?*

'They're coming from over the walls – we throw coins and rats come back. Thousands!'

*'That guild no longer exists!'*

The shriek echoed like a woman's scream.

The agent blinked, and all at once his tone changed, steadied. 'The mob, sir, they're calling for Tehol Beddict's release – can you not hear it? They're calling him a hero, a revolutionary—'

Karos Invictad slammed his sceptre down on his desk and rose. *'Is this what my gold paid for?'*

Feather Witch sensed the rebirth of Brys Beddict. She stopped plucking at the strips of skin hanging from her toes, drawing a deep breath as she felt him rushing closer, ever closer. So fast!

Crooning under her breath, she closed her eyes and conjured in her mind that severed finger. That fool the Errant had a lot to learn, still. About his formidable High Priestess. The finger still belonged to her, still held drops of her blood from when she had pushed it up inside her. Month after month, like a waterlogged stick in a stream, soaking her up.

Brys Beddict belonged to her, and she would use him well.

The death that was a non-death, for Rhulad Sengar, the insane Emperor. The murder of Hannan Mosag. And the Chancellor. And everyone else she didn't like.

And then . . . the handsome young man kneeling before her as she sat on her raised temple throne – in the new temple that would be built, sanctified to the Errant – kneeling, yes, while she spread her legs and invited him in. To kiss the place where his finger had been. To drive his tongue deep.

The future was so very bright, so very—

Feather Witch's eyes snapped open. Disbelieving.

As she felt Brys Beddict being pulled away, pulled out of her grasp. By some other force.

*Pulled away!*

She screamed, lurching forward on the dais, hands plunging into the floodwater – as if to reach down into the current and grasp hold of him once more – but it was deeper than she'd remembered. Unbalanced, she plunged face-first into the water. Involuntarily drew in a lungful of the cold, biting fluid.

Eyes staring into the darkness, as she thrashed about, her lungs contracting again and again, new lungfuls of water, one after another.

Deep – where was up?

A knee scraped the stone floor and she sought to bring her legs under her, but they were numb, heavy as logs – they would not work. One hand then, onto the floor, pushing upward – but not high enough to break the surface. The other hand, then, trying to guide her knees together – but one would drift out as soon as she left it seeking the other.

The darkness outside her eyes flooded in. Into her mind.

And, with blessed relief, she ceased struggling.

She would dream now. She could feel the sweet lure of that dream – almost within reach – and all the pain in her chest was gone – she could breathe this, she could. In and out, in and out, and then she no longer had to do even that. She could grow still, sinking down onto the slimy floor.

Darkness in and out, the dream drifting closer, almost within reach.

Almost . . .

The Errant stood in the waist-deep water, his hand on her back. He waited, even though her struggles had ceased.

Sometimes, it was true, a nudge was not enough.

The malformed, twisted thing that was Hannan Mosag crawled up the last street before the narrow, crooked alley that led to Settle Lake. Roving bands had come upon the wretched Tiste Edur in the darkness before dawn and had given him wide berth, chased away by his laughter.

Soon, everything would return to him. All of his power, purest Kurald Emurlahn, and he would heal this mangled body, heal the scars of his mind. With the demon-god freed of the ice and bound to his will once more, who could challenge him?

Rhulad Sengar could remain Emperor – that hardly mattered, did it? The Warlock King would not be frightened of him, not any more. And, to crush him yet further, he possessed a certain note, a confession – oh, the madness unleashed then!

Then, these damned invaders – well, they were about to find themselves without a fleet.

*And the river shall rise, flooding, a torrent to cleanse this accursed city. Of foreigners. Of the Letherii themselves. I will see them all drowned.*

Reaching the mouth of the alley, he dragged himself into its gloom, pleased to be out of the dawn's grey light, and the stench of the pond wafted down to him. Rot, dissolution, the dying of the ice. At long last, all his ambitions were about to come true.

Crawling over the slick, mould-slimed cobblestones. He could hear thousands in the streets, somewhere near. Some name being cried out like a chant. Disgust filled Hannan Mosag. He never wanted anything to do with these Letherii. No, he would have raised an impenetrable wall between them and his people. He would have ruled over the tribes, remaining in the north, where the rain fell like mist and the forests of sacred trees embraced every village.

There would have been peace, for all the Tiste Edur.

Well, he had sent them all back north, had he not? He had begun his preparations. And soon he would join them, as Warlock King. And he would make his dream a reality.

*And Rhulad Sengar? Well, I leave him a drowned empire, a wasteland of mud and dead trees and rotting corpses. Rule well, Emperor.*

He found himself scrabbling against a growing stream of icy water that was working its way down the alley, the touch numbing his hands, knees and feet. He began slipping. Cursing under his breath, Hannan Mosag paused, staring down at the water flowing round him.

From up ahead there came a loud *crack!* and the Warlock King smiled. *My child stirs.*

Drawing upon the power of the shadows in this alley, he resumed his journey.

'Ah, the fell guardians,' Ormly said as he strode to the muddy bank of Settle Lake. The Champion Rat Catcher had come in from the north side, where he'd been busy in Creeper District, hiring random folk to cry out the name of the empire's great revolutionary, the hero of heroes, the this and that and all the rest. *Tehol Beddict! He's taken all the money back – from all the rich slobs in their estates! He's going to give it all to every one of you – he's going to clear all your debts! And are you listening? I've more rubbish to feed you – wait, come back!* True, he'd just added on that last bit.

What a busy night! And then a runner from Selush had brought him the damned sausage that a man had once used to pick his nose or something.

All right, there was some disrespect in that and it wasn't worthy, not of Brys Beddict – the Hero's very own brother! – nor of himself, Ormly of the Rats. So, enough of that, then.

'Oh, look, sweetcakes, it's him.'

'Who, dove-cookie?'

'Why, I forget his name. Tha's who.'

Ormly scowled at the pair lolling on the bank like a couple of gaping fish. 'I called you guardians? You're both drunk!'

'You'd be too,' Ursto Hoobutt said, 'if 'n you had to listen to this simperin' witch 'ere.' He wagged his head to mime his wife as he said: 'Ooh, I wanna

baby! A big baby, with only one upper lip but a bottom one too to clamp onto you know where an' get even bigger! Ooh, syrup-smoochies, oh, *please? Can I? Can I? Can I!* '

'You poor man,' Ormly commiserated, walking up to them. He paused upon seeing the heaved and cracked slabs of ice crowding the centre of the lake. 'It's pushing, is it?'

'Took your time, too,' Pinosel muttered, casting her husband her third glowering look since Ormly had arrived. She swished whatever was in the jug in her left hand, then tilted it back to drink deep. Then wiped at her mouth, leaned forward and glared up at Ormly from lowered brows. 'Ain't gonna have no jus' one upper lip, neither. Gonna be healthy—'

'Really, Pinosel,' Ormly said, 'the likelihood of that—'

'You don't know nothing!'

'All right, maybe I don't. Not about the likes of you two, anyway. But here's what I do know. In the Old Palace there's a panel in the baths that was painted about six hundred years ago. Of Settle Lake or something a lot like it, with buildings in the background. And who's sitting there in the grasses on the bank, sharing a jug? Why, an ugly woman and an even uglier man – both looking a lot like you two!'

'Watchoo yer callin' ugly,' Pinosel said, lifting her head with an effort, taking a deep breath to compose her features, then patting at her crow's nest hair. 'Sure,' she said, 'I've had better days.'

'Ain't that the truth,' mumbled Ursto.

'An' I 'eard that! An' oose fault is that, porker-nose?'

'Only the people that ain't no more 'ere t'worship us an' all that.'

' 'Zactly!'

Ormly frowned at the pond and its ice. At that moment a huge slab buckled with a loud *crack!* And he found himself involuntarily stepping back, one step, two. 'Is it coming up?' he demanded.

'No,' Ursto said, squinting one-eyed at the groaning heap of ice. 'That'd be the one needing his finger back.'

The meltwater fringing the lake was bubbling and swirling now, bringing up clouds of silt as some current swept round the solid mass in the middle. Round and round, like a whirlpool only in reverse.

And all at once there was a thrashing, a spray of water, and a figure in its midst – struggling onto the bank, coughing, streaming muddy water, and holding in one incomplete hand a scabbarded sword.

Pinosel, her eyes bright as diamonds, lifted the jug in a wavering toast. 'Hail the Saviour! Hail the half-drowned dog spitting mud!' And then she crowed, the cry shifting into a cackle, before drinking deep once more.

Ormly plucked the severed finger from his purse and walked down to where knelt Brys Beddict. 'Looking for this?' he asked.

There had been a time of sleep, and then a time of pain. Neither had seemed to last very long, and now Brys Beddict, who had died of poison in the throne room of the Eternal Domicile, was on his hands and knees beside a lake of icy water. Racked with shivers, still coughing out water and slime.

And some man was crouched beside him, trying to give him a severed finger swollen and dyed pink.

He felt his left hand gripping a scabbard, and knew it for his own. Blinking to clear his eyes, he flitted a glance to confirm that the sword still resided within it. It did. Then, pushing the man's gift away, he slowly settled onto his haunches, and looked round.

Familiar, yes.

The man beside him now laid a warm hand on his shoulder, as if to still his shivering. 'Brys Beddict,' he said in a low voice. 'Tehol is about to die. Brys, *your brother needs you now*.'

And, as Brys let the man help him to his feet, he drew out his sword, half expecting to see it rusted, useless – but no, the weapon gleamed with fresh oil.

'Hold on!' shouted another voice.

The man steadying Brys turned slightly. 'What is it, Ursto?'

'The demon god's about to get free! Ask 'im!'

'Ask him what?'

'The name! Ask 'im what's its name, damn you! We can't send it away without its name!'

Brys spat grit from his mouth. Tried to think. The demon god in the ice, the ice that was failing. Moments from release, moments from . . . 'Ay'edenan of the Spring,' he said. 'Ay'edenan tek' velut !enan.'

The man beside him snorted. 'Try saying that five times fast! Errant, try saying it once!'

But someone was cackling.

'Brys—'

He nodded. *Yes. Tehol. My brother* – 'Take me,' he said.

'Take me to him.'

'I will,' the man promised. 'And on the way, I'll do some explaining. All right?'

Brys Beddict, Saviour of the Empty Throne, nodded.

'Imagine,' Pinosel said with a gusty sigh, 'a name in the old tongue. Oh now, ain't this one come a long way!'

'You stopped being drunk now, munch-sweets?'

She stirred, clambered onto her feet, then reached down and tugged at her husband. 'Come on.'

'But we got to wait – to use the name and send it away!'

'We got time. Let's perch ourselves down top of Wormface Alley, have another jug, an' we can watch the Edur crawl up t'us like the Turtle of the Abyss.'

Ursto snorted. 'Funny how that myth didn't last.'

A deeper, colder shadow slid over Hannan Mosag and he halted his efforts. Almost there, yes – where the alley opened out, he saw two figures seated in careless sprawls and leaning against one another. Passing a jug between them.

Squalid drunks, but perhaps most appropriate as witnesses – to the death of this gross empire. The first to die, too. Also fitting enough.

He made to heave himself closer, but a large hand closed about his cloak, just below his collar, and he was lifted from the ground.

Hissing, seeking his power—

Hannan Mosag was slowly turned about, and he found himself staring into an unhuman face. Grey-green skin like leather. Polished tusks jutting from the corners of the mouth. Eyes with vertical pupils, regarding him now without expression.

Behind him the two drunks were laughing.

The Warlock King, dangling in the air before this giant demoness, reached for the sorcery of Kurald Emurlahn to blast this creature into oblivion. And he felt it surge within him—

But now her other hand took him by the throat.

And squeezed.

Cartilage crumpled like eggshells. Vertebrae crunched, buckled, broke against each other. Pain exploded upward, filling Hannan Mosag's skull with white fire.

As the sun's bright, unforgiving light suddenly bathed his face.

*Sister Dawn – you greet me—*

But he stared into the eyes of the demoness, and saw still nothing. A lizard's eyes, a snake's eyes.

Would she give him nothing at all?

The fire in his skull flared outward, blinding him, then, with a soft, fading roar, it contracted once more, darkness rushing into its wake.

But Hannan Mosag's eyes saw none of this.

The sun shone full on his dead face, highlighting every twist, every marred flare of bone, and the unseeing eyes that stared out into that light were empty.

As empty as the Jaghut's own.

Ursto and Pinosel watched the Jaghut fling the pathetic, mangled body away.

Then she faced them. 'My ritual is sundered.'

Pinosel laughed through her nose, which proved a messy outburst the cleaning of which occupied her for the next few moments.

Ursto cast her a disgusted glance, then nodded to the Jaghut sorceress. 'Oh, they all worked at doing that. Mosag, Menandore, Sukul Ankhadu, blah blah.' He waved one hand. 'But we're here, sweetness. We got its name, y'see.'

The Jaghut cocked her head. 'Then, I am not needed.'

'Well, that's true enough. Unless you care for a drink?' He tugged the jug free of Pinosel's grip, raised it.

The Jaghut stared a moment longer, then she said, 'A pleasing offer, thank you.'

The damned sun was up, but on this side the city's wall was all shadow. Except, Sergeant Balm saw, for the wide open gate.

Ahead, Masan Gilani did that unthinkable thing again and rose in her stirrups, leaning forward as she urged her horse into a gallop.

From just behind Balm, Throatslitter moaned like a puppy under a brick. Balm shook his head. Another sick thought just popping into his head like a squeezed tick. Where was he getting them from anyway? And why was that gate open and why were they all riding hard straight for it?

And was that corpses he saw just inside? Figures moving about amidst smoke? Weapons?

What was that sound from the other side of that gate?

'Sharpers!' Deadsmell called out behind him. 'Keneb's in! He's holding the gate!'

Keneb? Who in Hood's name was Keneb?

'Ride!' Balm shouted. 'They're after us! Ride for Aren!'

Masan Gilani's rising and lowering butt swept into the shadow of the gate.

Throatslitter cried out and that was the sound all right, when the cat dives under the cartwheel and things go squirt and it wasn't his fault he'd hardly kicked at all. 'It dived out there, Ma! Oh, I hate cities! Let's go home – ride! Through that hole! What's it called? The big false-arched cantilevered hole!'

Plunging into gloom, horse hoofs suddenly skidding, the entire beast slewing round beneath him. *Impact*. Hip to rump, and Balm was thrown, arms reaching out, wrapping tight round a soft yielding assembly of perfected flesh – and she yelped, pulled with him as he plunged past dragging Masan Gilani from her saddle.

Hard onto cobbles, Balm's head slamming down, denting and dislodging his helm. Her weight deliciously flattening him for a single exquisite moment before she rolled off.

Horses stumbling, hoofs cracking down way too close. Soldiers rushing in, pulling them clear.

Balm stared up into a familiar face. 'Thom Tissy, you ain't dead?'

The ugly face spread into a toad's grin – *toad under a brick oh they smile wide then don't they* – and then a calloused hand slapped him hard. 'You with us, Balm? Glad you arrived – we're getting pressed here – seems the whole damned city garrison is here, tryin' to retake the gate.'

'Garrison? What's Blistig thinking? We're on his side! Show me the famous dancing girls of Aren, Tissy, that's what I'm here to see and maybe

more than see, hey?'

Thom Tissy dragged Balm onto his feet, set the dented helm back onto Balm's head, then he took him by the shoulders and turned him round.

And there was Keneb, and there, just beyond, barricades of wreckage and soldiers crouching down reloading crossbows while others hacked at Letherii soldiers trying to force a breach. Somewhere to the right a sharper detonated in an alley mouth where the enemy had been gathering for another rush. People screamed.

Fist Keneb stepped up to Balm. 'Where are the rest, Sergeant?'

'Sir?'

'The Adjunct and the army!'

'In the transports, sir, where else? Worst storm I've ever seen and now all the ships are upside down—'

Behind Balm Deadsmell said, 'Fist, they should be on the march.'

'Get Masan Gilani back on her horse,' Keneb said and Balm wanted to kiss the man, 'and I don't care if she kills the beast but I want her to reach the Adjunct – they need to step it up. Send their cavalry ahead riding hard.'

'Yes sir.'

'We're running low on munitions and quarrels and there's more of the Letherii gathering with every damned breath and if they find a decent commander we won't be able to hold.'

Was the Fist talking to Balm? He wasn't sure, but he wanted to turn round to watch Masan Gilani jump with her legs spread onto that horse's back, oh yes he did, but these hands on his shoulders wouldn't let him and someone was whimpering in his ear—

'Stop making that sound, Sergeant,' Keneb said.

Someone rode back out through the gate and where did they think they were going? There was a fight here! '*Boyfriends of the dancing girls*,' he whispered, reaching for his sword.

'Corporal,' Keneb said. 'Guide your sergeant here to the barricade to the left. You too, Throatslitter.'

Deadsmell said, 'He'll be fine in a moment, sir—'

'Yes, just go.'

'Aye, Fist.'

Boyfriends. Balm wanted to kill every one of them.

'This city looks like a hurricane went through it,' Cuttle said in a low mutter.

He had that right. The looting and all the rest was days old, however, and now it seemed that word of the Malazan breach was sweeping through in yet another storm – this one met with exhaustion – as the squad crouched in shadows near one end of an alley, watching the occasional furtive figure rush across the street.

They'd ambushed one unit forming up to march for the western gate. Quarrels and sharpers and a burner under the weapons wagon – still burning back there by the column of black smoke lifting into the ever-brightening sky. Took them all out, twenty-five dead or wounded, and before he and Gesler had pulled away locals were scurrying out to loot the bodies.

The captain had commandeered Urb and his squad off to find Hellian and her soldiers – the damned drunk had taken a wrong turn somewhere – which left Fiddler and Gesler to keep pushing for the palace.

Forty paces down the street to their right was a high wall with a fortified postern. City Garrison block and compound, and now that gate had opened and troops were filing out to form up ranks in the street.

'That's where we find the commander,' Cuttle said. 'The one organizing the whole thing.'

Fiddler looked directly across from where he and his marines were hiding and saw Gesler and his soldiers in a matching position in another alley mouth. *It'd be nice if we were on the roofs.* But no-one was keen to break into these official-looking buildings and maybe end up fighting frenzied

clerks and night watch guards. Noise like that and there'd be real troops pushing in from behind them.

*Maybe closer to the palace – tenement blocks there, and crowded together. It'd save us a lot of this ducking and crawling crap.*

*And what could be messy ambushes.*

'Hood's breath, Fid, there's a hundred out there and still more coming.' Cuttle pointed. 'There, that's the man in charge.'

'Who's our best shot with the crossbow?' Fiddler asked.

'You.'

*Shit.*

'But Koryk's all right. Though, if I'd pick anyone, it'd be Corabb.'

Fiddler slowly smiled. 'Cuttle, sometimes you're a genius. Not that it'll ever earn you rank of corporal or anything like that.'

'I'll sleep easy tonight, then.' Cuttle paused, then mused, 'Forty paces and a clear shot, but we'd blow any chance of ambush.'

Fiddler shook his head. 'No, this is even better. He looses his quarrel, the man goes down. We rush out, throw five or six sharpers, then wheel and back into the alley – away as fast as we can. The survivors rush up, crowd the alley mouth, and Gesler hits 'em from behind with another five or six sharpers.'

'Beautiful, Fid. But how's Gesler gonna know—'

'He'll work it out.' Fiddler turned and gestured Corabb forward.

A freshly appointed Finadd of the Main Garrison, standing five paces from Atri-Preda Beshur, turned from reviewing his squads to see an aide's head twitch, sparks flying from his helm, and then Finadd Gart, who was beside the Atri- Preda, shrieked. He was holding up one hand, seemingly right in Beshur's face, and there was a quarrel stub jutting from that hand, and blood was gushing down Beshur's face – as the Atri-Preda staggered back, the

motion pulling Gart's hand with him. For the quarrel was buried in Beshur's forehead.

The new Finadd, nineteen years of age and now the ranking officer of this full-strength unit, stared in disbelief.

Shouts, and he saw figures appearing at the mouth of an alley a ways down the street. Five, six in all, rushing forward with rocks in their hands—

Pointing, the Finadd screamed the order to countercharge, and then he was running at the very head of his soldiers, waving his sword in the air.

Thirty paces.

Twenty.

The rocks flew out, arced towards them. He ducked one that sailed close past his right shoulder and then, suddenly deaf, eyes filled with grit, he was lying on the cobbles and there was blood everywhere. Someone stumbled into his line of sight, one of his soldiers. The woman's right arm dangled from a single thin strip of meat, and the appendage swung wildly about as the woman did a strange pirouette before promptly sitting down.

She looked across at him, and screamed.

The Finadd sought to climb to his feet, but something was wrong. His limbs weren't working, and now there was a fire in his back – someone had lit a damned fire there – why would they do that? Searing heat reaching down, through a strange numbness, and the back of his head was wet.

Struggling with all his will, he brought one hand up behind, to settle the palm on the back of his head.

And found his skull entirely gone.

Probing, trembling fingers pushed into some kind of pulped matter and all at once the burning pain in his back vanished.

He could make things work again, he realized, and pushed some more, deeper.

Whatever he then touched killed him.

As Fiddler led his squad into a seeming rout, with fifty or sixty Letherii soldiers charging after them, Gesler raised his hand, which held a burner. Aye, messy, but there were a lot of them, weren't there?

Fiddler and his marines made it into the alley, tore off down it.

A crowd of Letherii reached the mouth, others pushing up behind them.

And munitions flew, and suddenly the street was a conflagration.

Without waiting, and as a gust of fierce heat swept over them, Gesler turned and pushed Stormy to lead the retreat.

Running, running hard.

They'd find the next street and swing right, come up round the other side of the walled compound. Expecting to see Fiddler and his own soldiers waiting opposite them again. More alley mouths, and just that much closer to the palace.

'We got gold, damn you!'

'Everybody's got that,' replied the barkeep, laconic as ever.

Hellian glared at him. 'What kinda accent is that?'

'The proper kind for the trader's tongue, which makes one of us sound educated and I suppose that's something.'

'Oh, I'll show you something!' She drew out her corporal's sword, giving him a hard push on the chest to clear the weapon, then hammered the pommel down on the bartop. The weapon bounced up from her hand, the edge scoring deep across Hellian's right ear. She swore, reached up and saw her hand come away red with blood. 'Now look what you made me do!'

'And I suppose I also made you invade our empire, and this city, and—'

'Don't be an idiot, you ain't that important. It was the winged monkeys did that.'

The barkeep's thin, overlong face twisted slightly as he arched a single brow.

Hellian turned to her corporal. 'What kinda sword you using, fool? One that don't work right, that's what kind, I'd say.'

'Aye, Sergeant.

'Sorry, Sergeant.'

'Aye and sorry don't cut it with me, Corporal. Now get that sword outa my sight.'

'Did you hear it coming?' another one of her soldiers asked.

'What? What's that supposed to mean, Boatsnort?'

'Uh, my name's—'

'I just told you your name!'

'Nothing, Sergeant. I didn't mean nothing.'

The barkeep cleared his throat. 'Now, if you are done with jabbering amongst yourselves, you can kindly leave. As I said before, this tavern is dry—'

'They don't make taverns dry,' Hellian said.

'I'm sure you didn't say that quite right—'

'Corporal, you hearing all this?'

'Yes.

'Aye.'

'Good. String this fool up. By his nostrils. From that beam right there.'

'By his nostrils, Sergeant?'

'That you again, Snortface?'

Hellian smiled as the corporal used four arms to grab the barkeep and drag him across the counter. The man was suddenly nowhere near as laconic as he was a moment ago. Sputtering, clawing at the hands gripping him, he shouted, 'Wait! *Wait!* '

Everyone halted.

'In the cellar,' the man gasped.

'Give my corporal directions and proper ones,' Hellian said, so very satisfied now, except for her dribbling ear, but oh, if any of her soldiers got out of line she could pick the scab and bleed all over them and wouldn't they feel just awful about it and then do exactly what she wanted them to do, 'which is guard the door.'

'Sergeant?'

'You heard me, guard the door, so we're not disturbed.'

'Who are we on the lookout for?' Snivelnose asked. 'Ain't nobody—'

'The captain, who else? She's probably still after us, damn her.'

Memories, Icarium now understood, were not isolated things. They did not exist within high-walled compartments in a mind. Instead, they were like the branches of a tree, or perhaps a continuous mosaic on a floor that one could play light over, illuminating patches here and there. Yet, and he knew this as well, for others that patch of light was vast and bright, encompassing most of a life, and although details might be blurred, scenes made hazy and uncertain with time, it was, nevertheless, a virtual entirety. And from this was born a sense of a self.

Which he did not possess and perhaps had never possessed. And in the grip of such ignorance, he was as malleable as a child. To be used; to be, indeed, abused. And many had done so, for there was power in Icarium, far too much power.

Such exploitation was now at an end. All of Taralack Veed's exhortations were as wind in the distance, and he was not swayed. The Gral would be Icarium's last companion.

He stood in the street, all of his senses awakened to the realization that he knew this place, this modest patch of the mosaic grey with promise. And true illumination was finally at hand. The measuring of time, from this

moment and for ever onward. A life begun again, with no risk of losing his sense of self.

*My hands have worked here. In this city, beneath this city.*

*And now awaits me, to be awakened.*

*And when I have done that, I will begin anew. A life, a host of tesserae to lay down one by one.*

He set out, then, for the door.

The door into his machine.

He walked, unmindful of those scurrying in his wake, of the figures and soldiers moving out of his path. He heard but held no curiosity for the sounds of fighting, the violence erupting in the streets to either side, the detonations as of lightning although this dawn was breaking clear and still. He passed beneath diffused shadows cast down by billowing smoke from burning buildings, wagons and barricades. He heard screams and shouts but did not seek out where they came from, even to lend succour as he would normally have done. He stepped over bodies in the street.

He walked alongside an ash-laden greasy canal for a time, then reached a bridge and crossed over into what was clearly an older part of the city. Down another street to an intersection, whereupon he swung left and continued on.

There were more people here in this quarter – with the day growing bolder and all sounds of fighting a distant roar to the west – yet even here the people seemed dazed. None of the usual conversations, the hawkers crying their wares, beasts pulling loaded carts. The drifting smoke wafted down like an omen, and the citizens wandered through it as if lost.

He drew nearer the door. Of course, it was nothing like a door in truth. More like a wound, a breach. He could feel its power stir to life, for as he sensed it so too did it sense him.

Icarium then slowed. A wound, yes. His machine was wounded. Its pieces had been twisted, shifted out of position. Ages had passed since he had built

it, so he should not be surprised. Would it still work? He was no longer so sure.

*This is mine. I must make it right, no matter the cost.*

*I will have this gift. I will have it.*

He started forward once more.

The house that had once disguised this nexus of the machine had collapsed into ruin and no efforts had been made to clear the wreckage. There was a man standing before it.

After a long moment, Icarium realized that he recognized this man. He had been aboard the ships, and the name by which he had been known was Taxilian.

As Icarium walked up to him, Taxilian, his eyes strangely bright, bowed and stepped back. 'This, Icarium,' he said, 'is your day.'

*My day? Yes, my first day.*

Lifestealer faced the ruin.

A glow was now rising from somewhere inside, shafts slanting up between snapped timbers and beams, lancing out in spears from beneath stone and brick. The glow burgeoned, and the world beneath him seemed to tremble. But no, that was no illusion – buildings groaned, shuddered. Splintering sounds, shutters rattling as from a gust of wind.

Icarium drew a step closer, drawing a dagger.

Thunder sounded beneath him, making the cobbles bounce in puffs of dust. Somewhere, in the city, structures began to break apart, as sections and components within them stirred into life, into inexorable motion. Seeking to return to a most ancient pattern.

More thunder, as buildings burst apart.

Columns of dust corkscrewed skyward.

And still the white glow lifted, spread out in a fashion somewhere between liquid and fire, pouring, leaping, the shafts and spears twisting in the air. Engulfing the ruin, spilling out onto the street, lapping around Icarium, who drew the sharp-edged blade diagonally, deep, up one forearm; then did the same with the other – holding the weapon tight in a blood-soaked hand.

Who then raised his hands.

To measure time, one must begin. To grow futureward, one must *root. Deep into the ground with blood.*

*I built this machine. This place that will forge my beginning. No longer outside the world. No longer outside time itself. Give me this, wounded or not, give me this. If K'rul can, why not me?*

All that poured from his wrists flared incandescent. And Icarium walked into the white.

Taxilian was thrown back as the liquid fire exploded outward. A moment of surprise, before he was incinerated. The eruption tore into the neighbouring buildings, obliterating them. The street in front of what had once been Scale House became a maelstrom of shattered cobbles, the shards of stone racing outward to stipple walls and punch through shutters. The building opposite tilted back, every brace snapping, then collapsed inward.

Fleeing the sudden storm, Taralack Veed and Senior Assessor ran – a half-dozen strides before both were thrown from their feet.

The Cabalhii monk, lying on his back, had a momentary vision of a mass of masonry rushing down, and in that moment he burst out laughing – a sound cut short as the tons of rubble crushed him.

Taralack Veed had rolled with his tumble, narrowly avoiding that descending wall. Deafened, half blind, he used his hands to drag himself onward, tearing his nails away and lacerating his palms and fingers on the broken cobbles.

And there, through the dust, the billowing white fire, he saw his village, the huts, the horses in their roped kraal, and there, on the hill beyond, the

goats huddled beneath the tree, sheltering from the terrible sun. Dogs lying in the shade, children on their knees playing with the tiny clay figurines that some travelling Malazan scholar had thought to be of great and sacred significance, but were in truth no more than toys, for all children loved toys.

Why, he had had his very own collection and this was long before he killed his woman and her lover, before killing the man's brother who had proclaimed the feud and had drawn the knife.

But now, all at once, the goats were crying out, crying out in dread pain and terror – dying! The huge tree in flames, branches crashing down.

The huts were burning and bodies sprawled in the dust with faces red with ruin. And this was death, then, death in the breaking of what had always been, solid and predictable, pure and reliable. The breaking – devastation, to take it all away.

Taralack Veed screamed, bloodied hands reaching for those toys – those beautiful, so very sacred toys—

The enormous chunk of stone that slanted down took the top of Taralack Veed's head at an angle, crushing bone and brain, and, as it skidded away, it left a greasy smear of red- and grey-streaked hair.

* * *

Throughout the city, buildings erupted into clouds of dust. Stone, tile, bricks and wood sailed outward, and white fire poured forth, shafts of argent light arcing out through walls, as if nothing could exist that could impede them. A shimmering, crazed web of light, linking each piece of the machine. And the power flowed, racing in blinding pulses, and they all drew inward, to one place, to one heart.

Icarium.

The north and west outer walls detonated as sections of their foundations shifted, moved four, five paces, twisting as if vast pieces of a giant puzzle were being moved into place. Rent, sundered, parts of those walls toppled and the sound of that impact rumbled beneath every street.

In the courtyard of an inn that had, through nefarious schemes, become the property of Rautos Hivanar, a huge piece of metal, bent at right angles, now lifted straight upward to twice the height of the man standing before it. Revealing, at its base, a hinge of white fire.

And the structure then tilted, dropped forward like a smith's hammer.

Rautos Hivanar dived to escape, but not quickly enough, as the massive object slammed down onto the backs of his legs.

Pinned, as white fire licked out towards him, Rautos could feel his blood draining down from his crushed legs, turning the compound's dust into mud.

*Yes*, he thought, *as it began with mud, so it now ends—*

The white fire enveloped him.

And sucked out from his mind every memory he possessed.

The thing that died there a short time later was not Rautos Hivanar.

The vast web's pulsing lasted but a half-dozen heartbeats. The shifting of the pieces of the machine, with all the destruction that entailed, was even more short-lived. Yet, in that time, all who were devoured by the white fire emptied their lives into it. Every memory, from the pain of birth to the last moment of death.

The machine, alas, was indeed broken.

As the echoes of groaning stone and metal slowly faded, the web flickered, then vanished. And now, dust warred with the smoke in the air above Letheras.

A few remaining sections of stone and brick toppled, but these were but modest adjustments in the aftermath of what had gone before.

And in this time of settling, the first voices of pain, the first cries for help, lifted weakly from heaps of rubble.

The ruins of Scale House were naught but white dust, and from it nothing stirred.

The bed of a canal had cracked during the earthquake, opening a wide fissure into which water plunged, racing down veins between compacted bricks and fill. And in the shaking repercussions of falling structures, buried foundations shifted, cracked, slumped.

Barely noticed amidst all the others, then, the explosion that tore up through that canal in a spray of sludge and water was relatively minor, yet it proved singular in one detail, for as the muddy rain of the canal's water sluiced down onto the still-buckling streets, a figure clawed up from the canal, hands reaching for mooring rungs, pulling itself from the churning foam.

An old man.

Who stood, ragged tunic streaming brown water, and did not move while chaos and spears of blinding light tore through Letheras. Who remained motionless, indeed, after those terrifying events vanished and faded.

An old man.

Torn between incandescent rage and dreadful fear.

Because of who he was, the fear won out. Not for himself, of course, but for a mortal man who was, the old man knew, about to die.

And he would not reach him in time.

Well, so it would be rage after all. Vengeance against the Errant would have to wait its turn. First, vengeance against a man named Karos Invictad.

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, had work to do.

Lostara Yil and the Adjunct rode side by side at the head of the column of cavalry. Directly ahead they could see the west wall of the city. Enormous cracks were visible through the dust, and the gate before them remained open.

The horses were winded, their breaths gusting from foam-flecked nostrils.

*Almost there.*

'Adjunct, was that munitions?'

Tavore glanced across, then shook her head.

'Not a chance,' Masan Gilani said behind them. 'Only a handful of crackers in the whole lot. Something else did all that.'

Lostara twisted in her saddle.

Riding beside Masan Gilani was Sinn. Not riding well, either. Gilani was staying close, ready to reach out a steadying hand. The child seemed dazed, almost drunk. Lostara swung back. 'What's wrong with her?' she asked the Adjunct.

'I don't know.'

As the road's slope climbed towards the gate, they could see the river on their left. Thick with sails. The Malazan fleet and the two Thrones of War had arrived. The main army was only two or three bells behind the Adjunct's column, and Fist Blistig was pushing them hard.

They drew closer.

'That gate's not going to close ever again,' Lostara observed. 'In fact, I'm amazed it's still up.' Various carved blocks in the arch had slipped down, jamming atop the massive wooden doors, which served to bind them in place.

As they rode up, two marines emerged from the shadows. Had the look of heavies, and both were wounded. The Dal Honese one waved.

Reining in before them, the Adjunct was first to dismount, one gloved hand reaching for her sword as she approached.

'We're holding still,' the Dal Honese marine said. Then he raised a bloodied arm. 'Bastard cut my tendon – it's all rolled up under the skin – see? Hurts worse than a burr in the arse . . . sir.'

The Adjunct walked past both marines, into the shadow of the gate. Lostara gestured for the column to dismount, then set out after Tavore. As she came opposite the marines, she asked, 'What company are you?'

'Third, Captain. Fifth Squad. Sergeant Badan Gruk's squad. I'm Reliko and this oaf is Vastly Blank. We had us a fight.'

Onward, through the dusty gloom, then out into dusty, smoke-filled sunlight. Where she halted, seeing all the bodies, all the blood.

The Adjunct stood ten paces in, and Keneb was limping towards her and on his face was desperate relief.

*Aye, they had them a fight all right.*

Old Hunch Arbat walked into the cleared space and halted beside the slumbering figure in its centre. He kicked.

A faint groan.

He kicked again.

Ublala Pung's eyes flickered open, stared up uncomprehendingly for a long moment, then the Tarthenal sat up. 'Is it time?'

'Half the damned city's fallen down which is worse than Old Hunch predicted, isn't it? Oh yes it is, worse and more than worse. Damned gods. But that's no mind to us, Old Hunch says.' He cast a critical eye on the lad's efforts, then grudgingly nodded. 'It'll have to do. Just my luck, the last Tarthenal left in Letheras and he's carrying a sack of sunbaked hens.'

Frowning, Ublala stretched a foot over and nudged the sack. There was an answering cluck and he smiled. 'They helped me clean,' he said.

Old Hunch Arbat stared for a moment, then he lifted his gaze and studied the burial grounds. 'Smell them? Old Hunch does. Get out of this circle, Ublala Pung, unless you want to join in.'

Ublala scratched his jaw. 'I was told not to join in on things I know nothing about.'

'Oh? And who told you that?'

'A fat woman named Rucket, when she got me to swear fealty to the Rat Catchers' Guild.'

'The Rat Catchers' Guild?'

Ublala Pung shrugged. 'I guess they catch rats, but I'm not sure really.'

'Out of the circle, lad.'

Three strides by the challenger onto the sands of the arena and the earthquake had struck. Marble benches cracked, people cried out, many falling, tumbling, and the sand itself shimmered then seemed to transform, as conglomerated, gritty lumps of dried blood rose into view like garnets in a prospector's tin pan.

Samar Dev, shivering despite the sun's slanting light, held tight to one edge of a bouncing bench, eyes fixed on Karsa Orlong who stood, legs wide to keep his balance but otherwise looking unperturbed – and there, at the other end of the arena, a swaying, hulking figure emerged from a tunnel mouth. Sword sweeping a furrow in the sand.

White fire suddenly illuminated the sky, arcing across the blue-grey sky of sunrise. Flashing, pulsing, then vanishing, as trembles rippled in from the city, then faded away. Plumes of dust spiralled skyward from close by – in the direction of the Old Palace.

On the imperial stand the Chancellor – his face pale and eyes wide with alarm – was sending runners scurrying.

Samar Dev saw Finadd Varat Taun standing near Triban Gnol. Their gazes locked – and she understood. *Icarium*.

*Oh, Taxilian, did you guess aright? Did you see what you longed to see?*

*'What is happening? '*

The roar brought her round, to where stood the Emperor. Rhulad Sengar was staring up at the Chancellor. 'Tell me! What has happened?'

Triban Gnol shook his head, then raised his hands. 'An earthquake, Emperor. Pray to the Errant that it has passed.'

'Have we driven the invaders from our streets?'

'We do so even now,' the Chancellor replied.

'I will kill their commander. With my own hands I will kill their commander.'

Karsa Orlong drew his flint sword.

The act captured the Emperor's attention, and Samar Dev saw Rhulad Sengar bare his teeth in an ugly smile. 'Another giant,' he said. 'How many times shall you kill me? You, with the blood of my kin already on your hands. Twice? Three times? It will not matter. *It will not matter!* '

Karsa Orlong, bold with his claims, brazen in his arrogance, uttered but five words in reply: 'I will kill you . . . once.' And then he turned to look at Samar Dev – a moment's glance, and it was all that Rhulad Sengar gave him.

With a shriek, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths rushed forward, his sword a whirling blur over his head.

Ten strides between them.

Five.

Three.

The gleaming arc of that cursed weapon slashed out, a decapitating swing – that rang deafeningly from Karsa's stone sword. Sprang back, chopped down, was blocked yet again.

Rhulad Sengar staggered back, still smiling his terrible smile. 'Kill me, then,' he said in a ragged rasp.

Karsa Orlong made no move.

With a scream the Emperor attacked again, seeking to drive the Toblakai back.

The ringing concussions seemed to leap from those weapons, as each savage attack was blocked, shunted aside. Rhulad pivoted, angled to one side, slashed down at Karsa's right thigh. Parried. A back-bladed swing up towards the Toblakai's shoulder. Batted away. Stumbling off balance from that block, the Emperor was suddenly vulnerable. A hack downward would

take him, a thrust would pierce him – a damned fool could have cut Rhulad down at that moment.

Yet Karsa did nothing. Nor had he moved, beyond turning in place to keep the Emperor in front of him.

Rhulad stumbled clear, then spun round, righting his sword. Chest heaving beneath the patchwork of embedded coins, eyes wild as a boar's. '*Kill me then!* '

Karsa remained where he was. Not taunting, not even smiling.

Samar Dev stared down on the scene, transfixed. *I do not know him. I have never known him.*

*Gods, we should have had sex – then I'd know!*

Another whirling attack, again the shrieking reverberation of iron and flint, a flurry of sparks cascading down. And Rhulad staggered back once more.

The Emperor was now streaming with sweat.

Karsa Orlong did not even seem out of breath.

Inviting a fatal response, Rhulad Sengar dropped down onto one knee to regain his wind.

*Invitation not accepted.*

After a time, in which the score or fewer onlookers stared on, silent and confused; in which Chancellor Triban Gnol stood, hands clasped, like a crow nailed to a branch; the Emperor straightened, lifted his sword once more, and resumed his fruitless flailing – oh, there was skill, yes, extraordinary skill, yet Karsa Orlong stood his ground, and not once did that blade touch him.

Overhead, the sun climbed higher.

Karos Invictad, his shimmering red silks stained and smudged with grit and dust, dragged Tehol Beddict's body across the threshold. Back into his

office. From down the corridor, someone was screaming about an army in the city, ships crowding the harbour, but none of that mattered now.

Nothing mattered but this unconscious man at his feet. Beaten until he barely clung to life. By the Invigilator's sceptre, his symbol of power, and was that not right? Oh, but it was.

Was the mob still there? Were they coming in now? An entire wall of the compound had collapsed, after all, nothing and no-one left to stop them. Motion caught his eye and his head snapped round – just another rat in the corridor, slithering past. *The Guild.* What kind of game were those fools playing? He'd killed dozens of the damned things, so easily crushed under heel or with a savage downward swing of his sceptre.

Rats. They were nothing. No different from the mob outside, all those precious citizens who understood nothing about anything, who needed leaders like Karos Invictad to guide them through the world. He adjusted his grip on the sceptre, flakes of blood falling away, his palm seemingly glued to the ornate shaft, but that glue had not set and wouldn't for a while, would it? Not until he was truly done.

Where was that damned mob? He wanted them to see – this final skull-shattering blow – their great hero, their revolutionary.

Martyrs could be dealt with. A campaign of misinformation, rumours of vulgarity, corruption, oh, all that was simple enough.

*I stood alone, yes, did I not? Against the madness of this day. They will remember that. More than anything else. They will remember that, and everything else I choose to give them.*

*Slaying the Empire's greatest traitor – with my own hand, yes.*

He stared down at Tehol Beddict. The battered, split-open face, the shallow breaths that trembled from beneath snapped ribs. He could put a foot down on the man's chest, settle some weight, until those broken ribs punctured the lungs, left them lacerated, and the red foam would spill out from Tehol's mashed nose, his torn lips. And, surprise. He would drown after all.

Another rat in the corridor? He turned.

The sword-point slashed across his stomach. Fluids gushed, organs following. Squealing, Karos Invictad fell to his knees, stared up at the man standing before him, stared up at the crimson-bladed sword in the man's hand.

'No,' he said in a mumble, 'but you are dead.'

Brys Beddict's calm brown eyes shifted from the Invigilator's face, noted the sceptre still held in Karos's right hand. His sword seemed to writhe.

Burning pain in the Invigilator's wrist and he looked down. Sceptre was gone. Hand was gone. Blood streamed from the stump.

A kick to the chest sent Karos Invictad toppling, trailing entrails that flopped down like an obscene, malformed penis between his legs.

He reached down with his one hand to pull it all back in, but there was no strength left.

*Did I kill Tehol? Yes, I must have. The Invigilator is a true servant of the empire, and always will be, and there will be statues in courtyards and city squares. Karos Invictad, the hero who destroyed the rebellion.*

Karos Invictad died then, with a smile on his face.

Brys Beddict sheathed his sword, knelt beside his brother, lifted his head into his lap.

Behind him, Ormly said, 'A healer's on the way.'

'No need,' Brys said. And looked up. 'An Elder God comes.'

Ormly licked his lips. 'Saviour—'

A cough from Tehol.

Brys looked down to see his brother's eyes flick open. One brown, one blue. Those odd eyes stared up at him for a long moment, then Tehol whispered something.

Brys bent lower. 'What?'

'I said, does this mean I'm dead?'

'No, Tehol. Nor am I, not any longer, it seems.'

'Ah. Then . . .'

'Then what?'

'Death – what's it like, Brys?'

And Brys Beddict smiled. 'Wet.'

'I always said cities were dangerous places,' Quick Ben said, brushing plaster dust from his clothes. The collapsing building had nearly flattened them both, and the wizard was still trembling – not from the close call, but from the horrendous sorcery that had lit the morning sky – a devouring, profoundly hungry sorcery. Had that energy reached for him, he was not sure he could have withstood it.

'What in Hood's name was that?' Hedge demanded.

'All I know, it was *old*. And vicious.'

'We gonna get any more, you think?'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'I hope not.'

They went on, through streets filled with rubble, and on all sides the cries of the wounded, figures staggering in shock, dust and smoke lifting into the sunlight.

Then Hedge held up a hand. 'Listen.'

Quick Ben did as he was bid.

And, from somewhere ahead – closer to the Eternal Domicile – the echo of 'Sharpers!'

'Aye, Quick, aye. Come on, let's go find 'em!'

'Wait – hold it, sapper – what are—'

'It's the Fourteenth, you thick-skulled halfwit!'

They began hurrying.

'Next time I see Cotillion,' Quick Ben hissed, 'I'm going to strangle him with his own rope.'

Six leagues to the north, a bone-white dragon with eyes of lurid red sailed through the morning sky. Wings creaking, muscles bunching, the wind hissing against scales and along bared fangs that were the length of shortswords.

Returning, after all this time, to the city of Letheras.

Hannan Mosag had been warned. The Crippled God had been warned. And yet neither had heeded Silchas Ruin. No, instead, they had conspired with Sukul Ankhadu and Sheltatha Lore, and possibly with Menandore herself. To get in his way, to oppose him and what he had needed to do.

More than this, the Letherii Empire had been hunting them for an inordinate amount of time, and out of forbearance Silchas Ruin had ignored the affront. For the sake of the Acquitor and the others.

Now, he was no longer ignoring anything.

An empire, a city, a people, a Tiste Edur Ceda and a mad Emperor.

The brother of Anomander and Andarist, for ever deemed the coldest of the three, the cruellest, Silchas Ruin flew, a white leviathan with murder in its heart.

White as bone, with eyes red as death.

Rhulad Sengar stumbled away, dragging his sword. Sweat streamed from him, his hair hanging ragged and dripping. He had struck again and again, not once piercing the defensive net of his challenger's stone sword. Six paces between them now, chewed-up sand soaked and clumped with nothing but spatters from the glistening oil that made the coins gleam.

Silent as all the other witnesses, Samar Dev watched on, wondering how all this would end, wondering how it *could* end. As long as Karsa refused to counter-attack . . .

And then the Toblakai raised his sword and walked forward.

Straight for the Emperor.

*As easy as that, then.*

Who rose with a sudden smile and lifted his weapon into a guard position.

The flint sword lashed out, an awkward cut, yet swung with such strength that Rhulad's block with his own weapon knocked one of his hands loose from the grip, and the iron blade flailed outward, and then, all at once, that cursed sword seemed to acquire a will of its own, the point thrusting into a lunge that dragged the Emperor forward with a scream.

And the blade sank into Karsa's left thigh, through skin, muscle, narrowly missing the bone, then punching out the back side. The Toblakai pivoted round, even as with appalling fluidity he brought his sword in a downward cut that sliced entirely through Rhulad's shoulder above the sword-arm.

As the arm, its hand still gripping the weapon now bound – trapped in Karsa's leg – parted from Rhulad's body, the Toblakai back-swung the flat of his blade into Rhulad's face, sending him sprawling onto the sand.

And Samar Dev found that she held the knife, the blade bared, and as Karsa turned to face her, she was already slicing deep across her palm, hissing the ancient words of release – letting loose the imprisoned spirits, the desert godlings and all those who were bound to the old knife—

Spirits and ghosts of the slain poured forth, freed by the power in her blood, streaming down over the rows of benches, down onto the floor of the arena.

To the terrible sounds of Rhulad Sengar's shrieking, those spirits rushed straight for Karsa, swept round, engulfed him – swirling chaos – a blinding moment as of fires unleashed—

—and Karsa Orlong, the Emperor's sword and the arm still holding it, vanished.

Lying alone on the sands of the arena, Rhulad Sengar spilled crimson from the stump of his shoulder.

And no-one moved.

To dwell within an iron blade had proved, for the ghost of Ceda Kuru Qan, a most interesting experience. After an immeasurable time of exploration, sensing all the other entities trapped within, he had worked out a means of escaping whenever he wished. But curiosity had held him, a growing suspicion that all dwelt in this dark place for some hidden purpose. *And they were waiting.*

Anticipation, even eagerness. And, indeed, far more bloodlust than Kuru Qan could abide.

He had considered a campaign of domination, of defeating all the other spirits, and binding them to his will. But a leader, he well understood, could not be ignorant, and to compel the revelation of the secret was ever a chancy proposition.

Instead, he had waited, patient as was his nature whether living or dead.

Sudden shock, then, upon the gushing taste of blood in his mouth, and the frenzied ecstasy that taste unleashed within him. Sour recognition – most humbling – in discovering such bestial weakness within him – and when the summoning arrived in the language of the First Empire, Kuru Qan found himself rising like a demon to roar his domination over all others, then lunging forth from the iron blade, into the world once again, leading a dread host—

To the one standing. Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai.

And the sword impaling his leg.

Kuru Qan understood, then, what needed to be done. Understood the path that must be forged, and understood, alas, the sacrifice that must be made.

They closed round the Toblakai warrior. They reached for that cursed sword and grasped hold of its blade. They drew with ferocious necessity on the blood streaming down the Toblakai's leg, causing him to stagger, and, with Kuru Qan in the forefront, the spirits tore open a gate.

A portal.

Chaos roared in on all sides, seeking to annihilate them, and the spirits began surrendering their ghostly lives, sacrificing themselves to the rapacious hunger assailing them. Yet, even as they did so, they pushed the Toblakai forward, forging the path, demanding the journey.

Other spirits awakened, from all around the warrior – the Toblakai's own slain, and they were legion.

Death roared. The pressure of the chaos stabbed, ripped spirits to pieces – even with all their numbers, the power of their will, they were slowing, they could not get through – Kuru Qan screamed – to draw more of the Toblakai's power would kill him. They had failed.

*Failed—*

In a cleared circle in an old Tarthenal burial ground, a decrepit shaman seated cross-legged in its centre stirred awake, eyes blinking open. He glanced up to see Ublala Pung standing just beyond the edge.

'Now, lad,' he said.

Weeping, the young Tarthenal rushed forward, a knife in his hands – one of Arbat's own, the iron black with age, the glyphs on the blade so worn down as to be almost invisible.

Arbat nodded as Ublala Pung reached him and drove the weapon deep into the shaman's chest. Not on the heart side – Old Hunch needed to take a while to die, to bleed out his power, to feed the multitude of ghosts now rising from the burial grounds.

'Get away from here!' Arbat shouted, even as he fell onto his side, blood frothing at his mouth. '*Get out!* '

Loosing a childlike bawl, Ublala Pung ran.

The ghosts gathered, pure-blooded and mixed-bloods, spanning centuries upon centuries and awake after so long.

And Old Hunch Arbat showed them their new god. And then showed them, with the power of his blood, the way through.

Kuru Qan felt himself lifted on a tide, shoved forward as if by an enormous wave, and all at once there were spirits, an army of them.

*Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai.*

*Tarthenal—*

Surging forward, the chaos thrust back, recoiling, then attacking once more.

Hundreds vanishing.

Thousands voicing wailing cries of agony.

Kuru Qan found himself close to the Toblakai warrior, directly in front of the flailing figure, and he reached back, as if to grab the Toblakai's throat. Closed his hand, and *pulled*.

Water, a crashing surf, coral sand shifting wild underfoot. Blinding heat from a raging sun.

Staggering, onto the shore – and yes, this was as far as Kuru Qan could go.

*Upon the shore.*

He released the warrior, saw him stumble onto the island's beach, dragging that sword-impaled leg—

Behind the old Ceda, the sea reached out, snatched Kuru Qan back with a rolling, tumbling inhalation.

Water everywhere, swirling, pulling him ever deeper, ever darker.

They were done.

*We are done.*

*And the sea, my friends, does not dream of you.*

On the arena floor, Emperor Rhulad Sengar lay dead. Bled out, his flesh where visible pale as river clay, and as cold. Sand dusted the sweaty coins and all the blood that had poured from him was turning black.

And the onlookers waited.

For the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths to rise again.

The sun rose higher, the sounds of fighting in the city drew closer.

And, had anyone been looking, they would have seen a speck above the horizon to the north. Growing ever larger.

One street away from the Eternal Domicile, Fiddler led his squad onto the rooftop of some gutted public building. Flecks of ash swirled in the hot morning air and all the city that they could see was veiled behind dust and smoke.

They'd lost Gesler and his squad, ever since the garrison ambush, but Fiddler was not overly concerned. All opposition was a shambles. He ran in a crouch to the edge facing the Eternal Domicile, looked across, and then down to the street below.

There was a gate, closed, but no guards in sight. *Damned strange. Where is everyone?*

He returned to where his soldiers waited, catching their breaths in the centre of the flat rooftop. 'All right,' he said, setting down his crossbow and opening his satchel, 'there's a gate that I can take out with a cusser from here. Then down we go and straight across and straight in, fast and mean. Kill everyone in sight, understood?' He drew out his cusser quarrel and carefully loaded the crossbow. Then resumed his instructions. 'Tarr takes up the rear crossing the street. Bottle, keep everything you got right at hand—'

'Sergeant—'

'Not now, Corabb. Listen! We're heading for the throne room. I want Cuttle out front—'

'Sergeant—'

'—with sharpers in hand. Koryk, you're next—'

'Sergeant—'

*'What in Hood's name is it, Corabb?'*

The man was pointing. Northward.

Fiddler and the others all turned.

To see an enormous white dragon bearing down on them.

An infrequent scattering of cut-down Letherii soldiers and small fires left behind by munitions had provided enough of a trail for Quick Ben and Hedge, and they were now crouched at the foot of a door to a burnt-out building.

'Listen,' Hedge was insisting, 'the roof here's right opposite the gate. I know Fid and I'm telling you, he's on that Hood-damned roof !'

'Fine, fine, lead on, sapper.' Quick Ben shook his head. *Something . . . I don't know . . .*

They plunged inside. The stench of smoke was acrid, biting. Charred wreckage lay all about, the detritus of a ruined empire.

'There,' Hedge said, then headed on into a corridor, down to a set of stairs leading upward.

*Something . . . oh, gods!*

*'Move it! '* Quick Ben snarled, shoving the sapper forward.

'What—'

'Hurry!'

The huge dragon angled down, straight for them.

Fiddler stared for a moment longer, seeing the beast opening its mouth, knowing what was coming, then he raised his crossbow and fired.

The bolt shot upward.

A hind limb of the dragon snapped out to bat the quarrel aside.

And the cusser detonated.

The explosion flattened the marines on the rooftop, sent Fiddler tumbling backward.

The roof itself sagged beneath them with grinding, crunching sounds.

Fiddler caught a glimpse of the dragon, streaming blood, its chest torn open, sliding off to one side, heading towards the street below, shredded wings flailing like sails in a storm.

A second bolt flew out to intercept it.

Another explosion, sending the dragon lurching back, down, into a building, which suddenly folded inward on that side, then collapsed with a deafening roar.

Fiddler twisted round—

—and saw Hedge.

—and Quick Ben, who was running towards the roof's edge, his hands raised and sorcery building round him as if he was the prow of a ship cutting through water.

Fiddler leapt to his feet and followed the wizard.

From the wreckage of the building beside the Eternal Domicile, the dragon was pulling itself free. Lacerated, bones jutting and blood leaking from terrible wounds. And then, impossibly, it rose skyward once more, rent wings flapping – but Fiddler knew that it was sorcery that was lifting the creature back into the air.

As it cleared the collapsed building, Quick Ben unleashed his magic. A wave of crackling fire crashed into the dragon, sent it reeling back.

Another.

And then another – the dragon was now two streets away, writhing under the burgeoning assault.

Then, with a piercing cry, it wheeled, climbed higher, and flew away, in full retreat.

Quick Ben lowered his arms, then fell to his knees.

Staring after the fast-diminishing dragon, Fiddler leaned his crossbow onto his shoulder.

'This ain't your fight,' he said to the distant creature. '*Fucking dragon*.'

Then he turned and stared at Hedge.

Who, grinning, stared back.

'No ghost?'

'No ghost. Aye, Fid, *I'm back*.'

Fiddler scowled, then shook his head. 'Hood help us all.' Then he turned to Quick Ben. 'And where in the Abyss have *you* been?'

Picking himself up from the buckled rooftop, Bottle stared across at those three soldiers. Didn't know one of them except that he was a sapper. And a damned Bridgeburner.

Beside him, Koryk groaned, then spat. 'Look at 'em,' he said.

Bottle nodded.

And, oddly enough, for all the soldiers in the squad, nothing more about it needed saying.

Bottle squinted at the fast-dwindling dragon. *Allow us to introduce ourselves . . .*

Trull Sengar gently lifted Seren's arms and stepped back from her embrace. She almost sagged forward, not wanting the moment to end, and something cold formed a fist in her stomach. Wincing, she turned away.

'Seren—'

She waved a hand, then met his eyes once more.

'My brother. My parents.'

'Yes,' she said.

'I cannot pretend that they are not there. That they mean nothing to me.'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

He crossed the dusty room, kicking through rubbish – the place had been stripped of virtually everything, no matter how worthless. They had lain together on their cloaks, watched by spiders in the corners near the ceiling and bats slung in a row beneath a window sill. He picked up the Imass spear from where it leaned against a wall and faced her, offering a faint smile. 'I can protect myself. And alone, I can move quickly—'

'Go, then,' she said, and felt anguish at the sudden hardness in her voice.

His half-smile held a moment longer, then he nodded and walked into the corridor that led to the front door.

After a moment Seren Pedac followed. 'Trull—'

He paused at the doorway. 'I understand, Seren. It's all right.'

*No it's not all right!* 'Please,' she said, 'come back.'

'I will. I can do nothing else. You have all there is of me, all that's left.'

'Then I have all I need,' she replied.

He reached out, one hand brushing her cheek.

And then was gone.

* * *

Emerging from the pathway crossing the yard, Trull Sengar, the butt of the spear ringing like the heel of a staff on the cobbles, walked out into the street.

And set off in the direction of the Eternal Domicile.

From the shadows of an alley opposite, the Errant watched him.

'I feel much better.'

Brys Beddict smiled across at his brother. 'You look it. So, Tehol, your manservant is an Elder God.'

'I'll take anybody I can find.'

'Why are your eyes two different colours now?'

'I'm not sure, but I think Bugg may be colour blind. Blue and green, green and blue, and as for brown, forget it.'

Said manservant who happened to be an Elder God walked into the room. 'I found her.'

Tehol was on his feet. 'Where? Is she alive?'

'Yes, but we've work to do . . . again.'

'We need to find that man, that Tanal—'

'No need for that,' Bugg replied, eyes settling on the corpse of Karos Invictad.

Brys did the same. A two-headed insect was slowly making its way towards the spilled entrails. 'What in the Errant's name is that?'

And Bugg hissed through his teeth. 'Yes,' he said, 'he's next.'

Outside, in the compound, in the street beyond, a mass of citizens were gathering. Their sound was like an advancing tide. There had been some thunderous explosions, and the unmistakable roar of sorcery, from the direction of the Eternal Domicile, but that had all been short-lived.

Tehol faced Bugg, 'Listen to that mob. We going to be able to leave here alive? I'm really not in the mood for a Drowning. Especially my own.'

Brys grunted. 'You've not been paying attention, brother. You're a hero. They want to see you.'

'I am? Why, I never imagined that they had it in them.'

'They didn't,' Bugg replied, with a sour expression. 'Ormly and Rucket have spent a fortune on criers.'

Brys smiled. 'Humbled, Tehol?'

'Never. Bugg, take me to Janath. Please.'

At that, Brys Beddict's brows rose. *Ah, it is that way, then.*

*Well.*

*Good.*

A surviving officer of the city garrison formally surrendered to the Adjunct just inside the west gate, and now Tavore led her occupying army into Letheras.

Leaving Fist Blistig in charge of the main force, she assembled the five hundred or so surviving marines, along with Fist Keneb, and her own troop of mounted cavalry, and set out for the imperial palace. This ill-named 'Eternal Domicile'.

Sinn, riding behind Lostara Yil, had cried out when the dragon had appeared over the city; then had laughed and clapped her hands when at least two cussers and then wave after wave of ferocious sorcery routed the creature.

Captain Faradan Sort's advance squads were still active – that much had been made abundantly clear. And they were at the palace, or at least very close. *And they were in a mood.*

Most commanders would have raged at this – uncontrolled soldiers raising mayhem somewhere ahead, a handful of grubby marines who'd lived in the wilds for too long now battering at the palace door, frenzied with bloodlust and eager to deliver vengeance. Was this how she wanted to announce her conquest? Would the damned fools leave anything still breathing in that palace?

And what of this un-killable Emperor? Lostara Yil did not believe such a thing was even possible. *A cusser in the bastard's crotch there on that throne and he'll be giving to the people for days and days.* She wouldn't put it past Fiddler, either. One step into the throne room, the *thwock* of that oversized crossbow, and then the sergeant diving back, trying to get clear as the entire room erupted. He'd probably happily kill himself for that pleasure.

Yet, while without doubt the Adjunct shared such visions, Tavore said nothing. Nor did she urge her troops to any haste – not that any of them

were in shape for that, especially the marines. Instead, they advanced at a measured pace, and citizens began appearing from the side lanes, alleys and avenues, to watch them march past. Some even cried out a welcome, with voices breaking with relief.

The city was a mess. Riots and earthquakes and Moranth munitions. Lostara Yil began to realize that, if the arrival of the Bonehunters signified anything, it was the promise of a return to order, a new settling of civilization, of laws and, ironically, of peace.

*But Adjunct, if we tarry here too long, that will turn. It always does. Nobody likes being under an occupier's heel. Simple human nature, to take one's own despair and give it a foreigner's face, then let loose the hounds of blood.*

*See these citizens? These bright, gladdened faces? Any one of them, before long, could turn. The reapers of violence can hide behind the calmest eyes, the gentlest of smiles.*

The column's pace was slowing, with ever more crowds before them. Chants were rising and falling here and there. Letherii words, the tone somewhere between hope and insistence.

'Adjunct, what is it they're all saying?'

'A name,' she replied. 'Well, two names, I think. One they call the Saviour. The other . . .'

'The other . . . what, sir?'

She cast Lostara a quick glance, then her mouth set, before she said, '*Emperor*.'

Emperor? 'But I thought—'

'A *new* Emperor, Captain. By proclamation, it would seem.'

*Oh, and have we nothing to say on this?*

Directly ahead was a wall of citizens, blocking all hopes of passage, through which a small group was moving, pushing its way to the forefront.

The Adjunct raised a gloved hand to signal a halt.

The group emerged, an enormously fat woman in the lead, followed by a gnarled little man who seemed to be carrying rats in the pockets of his cloak, and then two men who looked like brothers. Both lean, one in the uniform of an officer, the other wearing a tattered, blood-stained blanket.

Tavore dismounted, gesturing for Lostara to do the same.

The two women approached the group. As they drew closer, the fat woman stepped to one side and with a surprisingly elegant wave of one plump hand she said, 'Commander, I present to you Brys Beddict, once Champion to King Ezgara Diskanar – before the Edur conquest – now proclaimed the Saviour. And his brother, Tehol Beddict, financial genius, liberator of the oppressed and not half bad in bed, even now being proclaimed the new Emperor of Lether by his loving subjects.'

The Adjunct seemed at a loss for a reply.

Lostara stared at this Tehol Beddict – although, truth be told, she'd rather let her eyes linger on Brys – and frowned at the disgusting blanket wrapped about him. *Financial genius?*

Brys Beddict now stepped forward and, as had the huge woman, spoke in the trader's tongue. 'We would escort you to the Eternal Domicile, Commander, where we will, I believe, find an emperor without an empire, who will need to be ousted.' He hesitated, then added, 'I assume you come as liberators, Commander. And, accordingly, have no wish to overstay your welcome.'

'By that,' the Adjunct said, 'you mean to imply that I have insufficient forces to impose a viable occupation. Were you aware, Brys Beddict, that your eastern borderlands have been overrun? And that an army of allies now marches into your empire?'

'Do you come as conquerors, then?' Brys Beddict asked.

The Adjunct sighed, then unstrapped and pulled off her helm. She drew her hand from its glove and ran it through her short, sweat-damp hair. 'Hood forbid,' she muttered. 'Find us a way through these people, then, Brys

Beddict.' She paused, cast her gaze to Tehol Beddict, and slowly frowned. 'You are rather shy for an emperor,' she observed.

Tehol refuted that with the brightest smile, and it transformed him, and suddenly Lostara forgot all about the man's martial-looking brother.

*Spirits of the sand, those eyes . . .*

'I do apologize, Commander. I admit I have been somewhat taken aback.'

The Adjunct slowly nodded. 'By this popular acclaim, yes, I imagine—'

'No, not that. She said I was not half bad in bed. I am crushed by the other half, the "half good" bit—'

'Oh, Tehol,' the fat woman said, 'I was being modest for your sake.'

'Modesty from you, Rucket? You don't know the meaning of the word! I mean, I just look at you and it's hard not to, if you know what I mean.'

'No.'

'Anyway!' Tehol clapped his hands together. 'We've had the fireworks, now let's get this parade started!'

Sirryn Kanar ran down the corridor, away from the fighting. The damned foreigners were in the Eternal Domicile, delivering slaughter – no calls for surrender, no demands to throw down weapons. Just those deadly quarrels, those chopping shortswords and those devastating grenados. His fellow guards were dying by the score, their blood splashing the once pristine walls.

And Sirryn vowed he was not going to suffer the same fate.

They wouldn't kill the Chancellor. They needed him, and besides, he was an old man. Obviously unarmed, a peaceful man. Civilized. And the guard they'd find standing at his side, well, even he carried naught but a knife at his belt. No sword, no shield, no helm or even armour.

*I can stay alive there, right at the Chancellor's side.*

*But where is he?*

The throne room had been empty.

*The Emperor is in the arena. The mad fool is still fighting his pointless, pathetic fights.* And the Chancellor would be there, attending, ironic witness to the last Tiste Edur's drooling stupidity. *The last Tiste Edur in the city. Yes.*

He hurried on, leaving the sounds of fighting well behind him.

A day of madness – would it never end?

Chancellor Triban Gnol stepped back. The realization had come suddenly to him, with the force of a hammer blow. *Rhulad Sengar will not return. The Emperor of a Thousand Deaths . . . has died his last death.*

*Toblakai. Karsa Orlong, I do not know what you have done, I do not know how – but you have cleared the path.*

*You have cleared it and for that I bless you.*

He looked about, and saw that the meagre audience had fled – yes, the Eternal Domicile was breached, the enemy was within. He turned to the Finadd standing nearby. 'Varat Taun.'

'Sir?'

'We are done here. Gather your soldiers and escort me to the throne room, where we will await the conquerors.'

'Yes sir.'

'And we bring that witch with us – I would know what has happened here. I would know why she laid open her hand with that knife. I would know *everything*.'

'Yes, Chancellor.'

The captain was surprisingly gentle taking the pale woman into his custody, and indeed, he seemed to whisper something to her that elicited a weary nod. Triban Gnol's eyes narrowed. No, he did not trust this new Finadd. Would that he had Sirryn with him.

As they made their way from the arena, the Chancellor paused for one look back, one last look at the pathetic figure lying on the bloody sand. *Dead. He is truly dead.*

*I believe I always knew Karsa Orlong would be the one. Yes, I believe I did.*

He was almost tempted to head back, down onto the arena floor, to walk across the pitch and stand over the body of Rhulad Sengar. And spit into the Emperor's face.

*No time. Such pleasure will have to wait.*

*But I vow I will do it yet.*

Cuttle waved them to the intersection. Fiddler led the rest of his squad to join the sapper.

'This is the main approach,' Cuttle said. 'It's got to be.'

Fiddler nodded. The corridor was ornately decorated, impressively wide, with an arched ceiling gleaming with gold leaf. There was no-one about. 'So where are the guards, and in which direction is the throne room?'

'No idea,' Cuttle replied. 'But I'd guess we go left.'

'Why?'

'No reason, except everyone who tried to get away from us was more or less heading that way.'

'Good point, unless they were all headed out the back door.' Fiddler wiped sweat from his eyes. Oh, this had been a nasty bloodletting, but he'd let his soldiers go, despite the disapproving looks from Quick Ben. Damned High Mage and his nose in the air – and where in Hood's name did all that magic come from? Quick had never showed anything like that before. Not even close.

He looked across at Hedge.

Same old Hedge. No older than the last time Fiddler had seen him. *Gods, it doesn't feel real. He's back. Living, breathing, farting . . .* He reached out

and cuffed the man in the side of the head.

'Hey, what's that for?'

'No reason, but I'm sure I was owed doing that at least once.'

'Who saved your skin in the desert? And under the city?'

'Some ghost up to no good,' Fiddler replied.

'Hood, that white beard makes you look ancient, Fid, you know that?'

*Oh, be quiet.*

'Crossbows loaded, everyone? Good. Lead on, Cuttle, but slow and careful, right?'

They were five paces into the corridor when a side entrance ahead and to their right was suddenly filled with figures. And mayhem was let loose once more.

Tarr saw the old man first, the one in the lead, or even if he didn't see him first, he got off his shot before anyone else. And the quarrel sank into the side of the man's head, dead in the centre of his left temple. And everything sprayed out the other side.

Other quarrels caught him, at least two, spinning his scrawny but nice-robed body round before it toppled.

A handful of guards who had been accompanying the old man reeled back, at least two stuck good, and Tarr was already rushing forward, drawing his shortsword and bringing his shield round. He bumped hard against Corabb who was doing the same and swore as the man got in front of him.

Tarr raised his sword, a sudden, overwhelming urge to hammer the blade down on the bastard's head – but no, save that for the enemy—

Who were throwing down their weapons as they backed down the corridor.

'For Hood's sake!' Quick Ben shouted, dragging at Tarr to get past, then shoving Corabb to one side. 'They're surrendering, damn you! Stop slaughtering everyone!'

And from the Letherii group, a woman's voice called out in Malazan, 'We surrender! Don't kill us!'

That voice was enough to draw everyone up.

Tarr swung round, as did the others, to look at Fiddler.

After a moment, the sergeant nodded. 'Take 'em prisoner, then. They can lead us to the damned throne room.'

Smiles ran up to the body of the old man and started pulling at all his gaudy rings.

A Letherii officer stepped forward, hands raised. 'There's no-one in the throne room,' he said. 'The Emperor is dead – his body's in the arena—'

'Take us there, then,' Quick Ben demanded, with a glare at Fiddler. 'I want to see for myself.'

The officer nodded. 'We just came from there, but very well.'

Fiddler waved his squad forward, then scowled over at Smiles. 'Do that later, soldier—'

She bared her teeth like a dog over a kill, then drew out a large knife and, with two savage chops, took the old man's pretty hands.

Trull Sengar stepped out onto the sand of the arena, eyes fixed on the body lying near the far end. The gleam of coins, the head tilted back. He slowly walked forward.

There was chaos in the corridors and chambers of the Eternal Palace. He could search for his parents later, but he suspected he would not find them. They had gone with the rest of the Tiste Edur. Back north. Back to their homeland. And so, in the end, they too had abandoned Rhulad, their youngest son.

*Why does he lie unmoving? Why has he not returned?*

He came to Rhulad's side and fell to his knees. Set down his spear. A missing arm, a missing sword.

He reached out and lifted his brother's head. Heavy, the face so scarred, so twisted with pain that it was hardly recognizable. He settled it into his lap.

*Twice now, I am made to do this. With a brother whose face, there below me, rests too still. Too emptied of life. They look so . . . wrong.*

He would have tried, one last time, a final offering of reason to his young brother, an appeal to all that he had once been. Before all this. Before, in foolish but understandable zeal, he had grasped hold of a sword on a field of ice.

Rhulad would then, in another moment of weakness, pronounce Trull *Shorn*. Dead in the eyes of all Tiste Edur. And chain him to stone to await a slow, wasting death. Or the rise of water.

Trull had come, yes, to forgive him. It was the cry in his heart, a cry he had lived with for what seemed for ever. *You were wounded, brother. So wounded. He had cut you down, laid you low but not dead. He had done what he needed to do, to end your nightmare. But you did not see it that way. You could not.*

*Instead, you saw your brothers abandon you.*

*So now, my brother, as I forgive you, will you now forgive me?*

Of course, there would be no answer. Not from that ever still, ever empty face. Trull was too late. Too late to forgive and too late to be forgiven.

He wondered if Seren had known, had perhaps guessed what he would find here.

The thought of her made his breath catch in his throat.

Oh, he had not known such love could exist. And now, even in the ashes surrounding him here, the future was unfolding like a flower, its scent sweet beyond belief.

*This is what love means. I finally see—*

The knife thrust went in under his left shoulder blade, tore through into his heart.

Eyes wide in sudden pain, sudden astonishment, Trull felt Rhulad's head tilt to one side on his lap, then slide down from hands that had lost all strength.

*Oh, Seren, my love.*

*Oh, forgive me.*

Teeth bared, Sirryn Kanar stepped back, tugging his weapon free. One last Tiste Edur. Now dead, by his own hand. Pure justice still existed in this world. He had cleansed the Lether Empire with this knife, and look, see the thick blood dripping down, welling round the hilt.

A thrust to the heart, the conclusion of his silent stalk across the sands, his breath held overlong for the last three steps. And his blessed shadow, directly beneath his feet – no risk of its advancing ahead to warn the bastard. There was that one moment when a shadow had flitted across the sand – a damned owl, of all things – but the fool had not noticed.

No indeed: the sun stood at its highest point.

And every shadow huddled, trembling beneath that fierce ruler in the sky.

He could taste iron in his mouth, a gift so bitter he exulted in its cold bite. Stepping back, as the body fell to one side, fell right over that pathetic savage's spear.

*The barbarian dies. As he must, for mine is the hand of civilization.*

He heard a commotion at the far end and spun round.

The quarrel pounded into his left shoulder, flung him back, where he tripped over the two corpses then twisted in his fall, landing on his wounded side.

Pain flared, stunning him.

'*No*,' Hedge moaned, pushing past Koryk who turned with a chagrined expression on his face.

'Damn you, Koryk,' Fiddler started.

'No,' said Quick Ben, 'You don't understand, Fid.'

Koryk shrugged. 'Sorry, Sergeant. Habit.'

Fiddler watched the wizard follow Hedge over to where the three bodies were lying on the sand. But the sapper was paying no attention to the skewered Letherii, instead landing hard on his knees beside one of the Tiste Edur.

'See the coins on that one?' Cuttle asked. 'Burned right in—'

'That was the Emperor,' said the captain who had brought them here. 'Rhulad Sengar. The other Edur . . . I don't know. But,' he then added, 'your friends do.'

Yes, Fiddler could see that, and it seemed all at once that there was nothing but pain in this place. Trapped in the last breaths, given voice by Hedge's alarmingly uncharacteristic, almost animal cries of grief. Shaken, Fiddler turned to his soldiers. 'Take defensive positions, all of you. Captain, you and the other prisoners over there, by that wall, and don't move if you want to stay alive. Koryk, rest easy with that damned crossbow, all right?'

Fiddler then headed over to his friends.

And almost retreated again when he saw Hedge's face, so raw with anguish, so . . . exposed.

Quick Ben turned and glanced back at Fiddler, a warning of some sort, and then the wizard walked over to the fallen Letherii.

Trembling, confused, Fiddler followed Quick Ben. Stood beside him, looking down at the man.

'He'll live,' he said.

Behind them, Hedge rasped, '*No he won't.*'

That voice did not even sound human. Fiddler turned in alarm, and saw Hedge staring up at Quick Ben, as if silent communication was passing between the two men.

Then Hedge asked, 'Can you do it, Quick? Some place with . . . with eternal torment. Can you do that, wizard? *I asked if you can do that!* '

Quick Ben faced Fiddler, a question in his eyes.

*Oh no, Quick, this one isn't for me to say—*

'Fiddler, help me decide. Please.'

*Gods, even Quick Ben's grieving. Who was this warrior?* 'You're High Mage, Quick Ben. Do what needs doing.'

The wizard turned back to Hedge. 'Hood owes me, Hedge.'

'What kind of answer is that?'

But Quick Ben turned, gestured, and a dark blur rose round the Letherii, closed entirely about the man's body, then shrank, as if down into the sand, until nothing remained. There was a faint scream as whatever awaited the Letherii had reached out to take hold of him.

Then the wizard snapped out a hand and pulled Fiddler close, and his face was pale with rage. '*Don't you pity him, Fid. You understand me? Don't you pity him!* '

Fiddler shook his head. 'I – I won't, Quick. Not for a moment. Let him scream, for all eternity. Let him scream.'

A grim nod, then Quick Ben pushed him back.

Hedge wept over the Tiste Edur, wept like a man for whom all light in the world has been lost, and would never return.

And Fiddler did not know what to do.

Watching from an unseen place, the Errant stepped back, pulled away as if he would hurl himself from a cliff.

He was what he was.

A tipper of balances.

And now, this day – may the Abyss devour him whole – a maker of widows.

Ascending the beach's gentle slope, Karsa Orlong halted. He reached down to the sword impaling his leg, and closed a hand about the blade itself, just above the hilt. Unmindful of how the notched edges sliced into his flesh, he dragged the weapon free.

Blood bloomed from the puncture wounds, but only for a moment. The leg was growing numb, but he would have use of it for a while yet.

Still holding the cursed sword by its blade, he pushed himself forward, limped onto the sward. And saw, a short distance to his right, a small hut from which smoke gusted out.

The Toblakai warrior headed over.

Coming opposite it, he dropped the iron sword, took another step closer, bent down and pushed one hand under the edge of the hut. With an upward heave, he lifted the entire structure clear, sent it toppling onto its back like an upended turtle.

Smoke billowed, caught the breeze, and was swept away.

Before him, seated cross-legged, was an ancient, bent and broken creature.

A man. A god.

Who looked up with narrowed eyes filled with pain. Then those eyes shifted, to behind Karsa, and the warrior turned.

The spirit of the Emperor had arrived, he saw. Young – younger than Karsa had imagined Rhulad Sengar to be – and, with his clear, unmarred flesh, a man not unhandsome. Lying on the ground as if in gentle sleep.

Then his eyes snapped open and he shrieked.

A short-lived cry.

Rhulad pushed himself onto his side, up onto his hands and knees – and saw, lying close by, his sword.

'Take it!' the Crippled God cried. 'My dear young champion, Rhulad Sengar of the Tiste Edur. Take up your sword!'

'Do not,' Karsa said. 'Your spirit is here – it is all you have, all you are. When I kill it, oblivion will take you.'

'Look at his leg! He is almost as crippled as I am! Take the sword, Rhulad, and cut him down!'

But Rhulad still hesitated, there on his hands and knees, his breaths coming in rapid gasps.

The Crippled God wheezed, coughed, then said in a low, crooning voice, 'You can return, Rhulad. To your world. You can make it right. This time, you can make everything right. Listen to me, Rhulad. Trull is alive! Your brother, he is alive, and he walks to the Eternal Domicile! He walks to find you! Kill this Toblakai and you can return to him, you can say all that needs to be said!

*'Rhulad Sengar, you can ask his forgiveness.'*

At that the Tiste Edur's head lifted. Eyes suddenly alight, making him look . . . *so young*.

And Karsa Orlong felt, in his heart, a moment of regret.

Rhulad Sengar reached for the sword.

And the flint sword swung down, decapitating him.

The head rolled, settled atop the sword. The body pitched sideways, legs kicking spasmodically, then growing still as blood poured from the open neck. In a moment, that blood slowed.

Behind Karsa, the Crippled God hacked laughter, then said, 'I have waited a long time for you, Karsa Orlong. I have worked so hard . . . to bring you to this sword. For it is yours, Toblakai. No other can wield it as you can. No other can withstand its curse, can remain sane, can remain its master. This weapon, my Chosen One, is for you.'

Karsa Orlong faced the Crippled God. 'No-one chooses me. I do not give anyone that right. I am Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. All choices belong to me.'

'Then choose, my friend. Fling away that pathetic thing of stone you carry. Choose the weapon made for you above all others.'

Karsa bared his teeth.

The Crippled God's eyes widened briefly, then he leaned forward, over his brazier of smouldering coals. 'With the sword, Karsa Orlong, you will be immortal.' He waved a gnarled hand and a gate blistered open a few paces away. 'There. Go back to your homeland, Karsa. Proclaim yourself Emperor of the Teblor. Guide your people for ever more. Oh, they are sorely beset. Only you can save them, Karsa Orlong. And with the sword, none can stand before you. You will save them, you will lead them to domination – a campaign of slaughtered "children" such as the world has never seen before. Give answer, Toblakai! Give answer to all the wrongs you and your people have suffered! *Let the children witness!* '

Karsa Orlong stared down at the Crippled God.

And his sneer broadened, a moment, before he turned away.

*'Do not leave it here! It is for you! Karsa Orlong, it is for you! '*

Someone was coming up from the sand. A wide, heavily muscled man, and three black-skinned bhokorala.

Karsa limped to meet them.

Withal felt his heart pounding in his chest. He'd not expected . . . well, he'd not known what to expect, only what was expected *of him*.

'You are not welcome,' said the giant with the tattooed face and the wounded leg.

'I'm not surprised. But here I am anyway.' Withal's eyes flicked to the sword lying in the grass. The Tiste Edur's head was resting on it like a gift. The weaponsmith frowned. 'Poor lad, he never understood—'

'I do,' growled the giant.

Withal looked up at the warrior. Then over to where crouched the Crippled God, before returning once more to his regard of the giant. 'You said no?'

'As much.'

'Good.'

'Will you take it now?'

'I will – to break it on the forge where it was made.' And he pointed to the ramshackle smithy in the distance.

The Crippled God hissed, 'You said it could never be broken, Withal!'

The weaponsmith shrugged. 'We're always saying things like that. Pays the bills.'

A horrid cry was loosed from the Crippled God, ending in strangled hacking coughs.

The giant was studying Withal in return, and he now asked, 'You made this cursed weapon?'

'I did.'

The back-handed slap caught Withal by surprise, sent him flying backward. Thumping hard onto his back, staring up at the spinning blue sky – that suddenly filled with the warrior, looking down.

'Don't do it again.'

And after saying that, the giant moved off.

Blinking in the white sunlight, Withal managed to turn onto his side, and saw the giant walk into a portal of fire, then vanish as the Crippled God screamed again. The portal suddenly disappeared with a snarl.

One of the nachts brought its horrid little face close over Withal, like a cat about to steal his breath. It cooed.

'Yes, yes,' Withal said, pushing it away, 'get the sword. Yes. Break the damned thing.'

The world spun round him and he thought he would be sick. 'Sandalath, love, did you empty the bucket? Sure it was piss but it smelled mostly of beer, didn't it? I coulda drunk it all over again, you see.'

He clambered upward, swayed back and forth briefly, then reached down and, after a few tries, collected the sword.

Off to the smithy. Not many ways of breaking a cursed sword. A weapon even nastier would do it, but in this case there wasn't one. So, back to the old smith's secret. *To break an aspected weapon, bring it home, to the forge where it was born.*

Well, he would do just that, and do it now.

Seeing the three nachts peering up at him, he scowled. 'Go bail out the damned boat – I'm not in the mood to drown fifty sweeps from shore.'

The creatures tumbled over each in their haste to rush back to the beach.

Withal walked to the old smithy, to do what needed doing.

Behind him, the Crippled God bawled to the sky.

A terrible, terrible sound, a god's cry. One he never wanted to hear ever again.

At the forge, Withal found an old hammer, and prepared to undo all that he had done. Although, he realized as he set the sword down on the rust-skinned anvil and studied the blood-splashed blade, that was, in all truth, impossible.

After a moment, the weaponsmith raised the hammer.

Then brought it down.

# EPILOGUE

She walked through the shrouds of dusk
And came to repast
At the Gates of Madness.

Where the living gamed with death
And crowed triumphant
At the Gates of Madness.

Where the dead mocked the living
And told tales of futility
At the Gates of Madness.

She came to set down her new child
There on the stained altar
At the Gates of Madness.

'This,' said she, 'is what we must do,
In hope and humility
At the Gates of Madness.'

And the child did cry in the night
To announce bold arrival
At the Gates of Madness.

Have we dreamed this enough now?
Our promise of suffering
At the Gates of Madness?

Will you look down upon its new face
And whisper songs of anguish
At the Gates of Madness?

Taking the sawtoothed key in hand
To let loose a broken future
At the Gates of Madness?

Tell then your tale of futility to the child
All your games with death
At the Gates of Madness.

We who stand here have heard it before
On this the other side
Of the Gates of Madness.

Prayer of Child
The Masked Monks of Cabal

Dragging his soul from its place of exhaustion and horror, the sound of a spinning chain awoke Nimander Golit. He stared up at the stained ceiling of his small room, his heart thumping hard in his chest, his body slick with sweat beneath damp blankets.

That sound – it had seemed so real—

And now, with eyes widening, he heard it again.

Spinning, then odd *snaps!* Then spinning once more.

He sat up. The squalid town outside slept, drowned in darkness unrelieved by any moon. And yet . . . the sound was coming from the street directly below.

Nimander rose from the bed, made his way to the door, out into the chilly hallway. Grit and dust beneath his bare feet as he padded down the rickety stairs.

Emerging, he rushed out into the street.

Yes, night's deepest pit, and this was not – could not be – a dream.

The hissing chain and soft clack, close, brought him round. To see another Tiste Andii emerge from the gloom. A stranger. Nimander gasped.

The stranger was twirling a chain from one upraised hand, a chain with rings at each end.

'Hello, Nimander Golit.'

'Who – who are you? How do you know my name?'

'I have come a long way, to this Isle of the Shake – they are our kin, did you know that? I suppose you did – but they can wait, for they are not yet ready and perhaps will never be ready. Not just Andii blood, after all. But Edur. Maybe even Liosan, not to mention human. No matter. Leave Twilight her island . . .' he laughed, 'empire.'

'What do you want?'

'You, Nimander Golit. And your kin. Go now, gather them. It is time for us to leave.'

'What? Where?'

'Are you truly a child?' the stranger snapped in frustration. The rings clicked, the chain spiralled tight about his index finger. 'I am here to lead you home, Nimander. All you spawn of Anomander Rake, the Black-Winged Lord.'

'But where is home?'

'Listen to me! *I am taking you to him!* '

Nimander stared, then stepped back. 'He does not want us—'

'It does not matter what he wants. Nor even what I want! Do you understand yet? *I am her Herald!* '

Her?

All at once Nimander cried out, dropped hard down onto his knees on the cobbles, his hands at his face. 'This – this is not a dream?'

The stranger sneered. 'You can keep your nightmares, Nimander. You can stare down at the blood on your hands for all eternity, for all I care. She was, as you say, insane. And dangerous. I tell you this, I would have left her

corpse lying here in the street, this night, if she still lived. So, enough of that.

'Go, bring your kin here. Quickly, Nimander, while Darkness still holds this island.'

And Nimander climbed to his feet, then hobbled into the decrepit tenement.

*Her Herald. Oh, Mother Dark, you would summon our father, as you now summon us?*

*But why?*

*Oh, it must be. Yes. Our exile – Abyss below – our exile is at an end!*

Waiting in the street, Clip spun his chain. A pathetic bunch, if this Nimander was the best among them. Well, they would have to do, for he did not lie when he said the Shake were not yet ready.

That was, in fact, the only truth he had told, on this darkest of nights.

*And how did you fare in Letheras, Silchas Ruin? Not well, I'd wager.*

*You're not your brother. You never were.*

*Oh, Anomander Rake, we will find you. And you will give answer to us. No, not even a god can blithely walk away, can escape the consequences. Of betrayal.*

*Yes, we will find you. And we will show you. We will show you just how it feels.*

Rud Elalle found his father seated atop a weathered boulder at the edge of the small valley near the village. Climbed up and joined Udinaas, settling onto the sun-warmed stone at his side.

A ranag calf had somehow become separated from its mother, and indeed the entire herd, and now wandered the valley floor, bawling.

'We could feast on that one,' Rud said.

'We could,' Udinaas replied. 'If you have no heart.'

'We must live, and to live we must eat—'

'And to live and eat, we must kill. Yes, yes, Rud, I am aware of all that.'

'How long will you stay?' Rud asked, then his breath caught in his throat. The question had just come out – the one he had been dreading to ask for so long.

Udinaas shot him a surprised look, then returned his attention to the lost calf. 'She grieves,' he said. 'She grieves, so deep in her heart that it reaches out to me – as if the distance was nothing. *Nothing*. This is what comes,' he added without a trace of bitterness, 'of rape.'

Rud decided it was too hard to watch his father's face at this moment, so he swung his gaze down to the distant calf.

'I told Onrack,' Udinaas continued. 'I had to. To just . . . get it out, before it devoured me. Now, well, I regret doing that.'

'You need not. Onrack had no greater friend. It was necessary that he know the truth—'

'No, Rud, that is never *necessary*. Expedient, sometimes. Useful, other times. The rest of the time, it just *wounds*.'

'Father, what will you do?'

'Do? Why, nothing. Not for Seren, not for Onrack. I'm nothing but an ex-slave.' A momentary smile, wry. 'Living with the savages.'

'You are more than just that,' Rud said.

'I am?'

'Yes, you are my father. And so I ask again, how long will you stay?'

'Until you toss me out, I suppose.'

Rud came as close to bursting into tears as he had ever been. His throat closed up, so tight that he could say nothing for a long moment, as the tide of feeling rose within him and only slowly subsided. Through blurred eyes, he watched the calf wander in the valley.

Udinaas resumed as if unmindful of the reaction his words had elicited. 'Not that I can teach you much, Rud.

Mending nets, maybe.'

'No, father, you can teach me the most important thing of all.'

Udinaas eyed him askance, sceptical and suspicious.

Three adult ranag appeared on a crest, lumbered down towards the calf. Seeing them, the young beast cried out again, even louder this time, and raced to meet them.

Rud sighed. 'Father, you can teach me your greatest skill.

How to *survive*.'

Neither said anything then for some time, and Rud held his eyes on the ranag as they ascended the far side of the valley. In this time, it seemed Udinaas had found something wrong with his eyes, for his hands went to his face again and again. Rud did not turn to observe any of that.

Then, eventually, with the valley empty before them, his father rose. 'Looks like we go hungry after all.'

'Never for long,' Rud replied, also rising.

'No, that's true.'

They made their way back to the village.

His hands stained with paint, Onrack tied the rawhide straps about the bundle, then slung it over a shoulder and faced his wife. 'I must go.'

'So you say,' Kilava replied.

'The journey, to where lies the body of my friend, will ease my spirit.'

'Without doubt.'

'And I must speak to Seren Pedac. I must tell her of her husband, of his life since the time he gave her his sword.'

'Yes.'

'And now,' Onrack said, 'I must go and embrace our son.'

'I will join you.'

Onrack smiled. 'That will embarrass him.'

'No, you damned fool. I said I will join you. If you think you're going anywhere without me, you are mad.'

'Kilava—'

'I have decided. I will let the journey ease your heart, husband. I will not chatter until your ears bleed and like a bhederin you look for the nearest cliff-edge.'

He stared at her with love welling in his eyes. 'Chatter? I have never heard you chatter.'

'You never will, either.'

He nodded. 'This is very well, wife. Join me, then. Help me heal with your presence alone—'

'Be very careful now, Onrack.'

Wisely, he said nothing more.

They went to say goodbye to their son.

'This is exhausting!' Emperor Tehol Beddict said, slumping down onto his throne.

Bugg's face soured as he said, 'Why? You haven't done anything yet.'

'Well, it's only been three weeks. I tell you, my list of reforms is so long I'll never get around to any of them.'

'I applaud your embrace of incompetence,' Bugg said. 'You'll make a fine Emperor.'

'Well,' Brys ventured from where he stood leaning against the wall to the right of the dais, 'there is peace in the land.'

Bugg grimaced. 'Yes, leading one to wonder just how long an entire empire can hold its breath.'

'And if anyone has the answer to that one, dear manservant, it would be you.'

'Oh, now I am amused.'

Tehol smiled. 'We can tell. And now, that wasn't the royal "we". Which we admit we cannot get used to in our fledgling innocence.'

Brys said, 'The Adjunct is on her way, and then there is Shurq Elalle who wants to talk to you about something. Aren't there things that need discussing?' He then waited for a reply, any reply, but instead earned nothing but blank stares from his brother and Bugg.

From a side entrance, the new Chancellor entered in a swirl of gaudy robes. Brys hid his wince. Who would have thought she'd plunge right into bad taste like a grub into an apple?

'Ah,' Tehol said, 'doesn't my Chancellor look lovely this morning?'

Janath's expression remained aloof. 'Chancellors are not supposed to look lovely. Competence and elegance will suffice.'

'No wonder you stand out so in here,' Bugg muttered.

'Besides,' Janath continued, 'such descriptions are better suited to the role of First Concubine, which tells me precisely which brain you're thinking with, beloved husband. Again.'

Tehol held up his hands as if in surrender, then he said in his most reasonable tone – one Brys recognized with faint dismay – 'I still see no reason why you can't be First Concubine as well.'

'I keep telling you,' Bugg said. 'Wife to the Emperor means she's Empress.' He then turned to Janath. 'Giving you three legitimate titles.'

'Don't forget scholar,' Tehol observed, 'which most would hold cancels out all the others. Even wife.'

'Why,' said Bugg, 'now your lessons will never end.'

Another moment of silence, as everyone considered all this.

Then Tehol stirred on his throne. 'There's always Rucket! She'd make a fine First Concubine! Goodness, how the blessings flow over.'

Janath said, 'Careful you don't drown, Tehol.'

'Bugg would never let that happen, sweetness. Oh, since we're discussing important matters before the Adjunct arrives to say goodbye, I was thinking that Preda Varat Taun needs an able Finadd to assist his reconstruction efforts and all that.'

Brys straightened. Finally, they were getting to genuine subjects. 'Who did you have in mind?'

'Why, none other than Ublala Pung!'

Bugg said, 'I'm going for a walk.'

* * *

Using an iron bar as a lever, Seren Pedac struggled with the heavy pavestones at the entrance to her house. Sweat glistened on her bared arms and her hair had come loose from its ties – she would get it cut short soon. As befitted her life now.

But on this morning, this task remained before her, and she set about it with unrelenting diligence, using her body without regard to the consequences. Prying loose the heavy stones, dragging and pushing them to one side with scraped and bleeding hands.

Once done, she would take a shovel to the underfill, as far down as she could manage.

For the moment, however, the centre stone was defeating her, and she feared she would not have the strength to move it.

'Pardon my intrusion,' said a man's voice, 'but it looks as if you need help.'

She looked up from where she leaned on the bar. Squinted sceptically. 'Not sure you want to risk that, sir,' she said to the old man, and then fell silent. He had a mason's wrists, with large, well-worked hands. She wiped

sweat from her brow and frowned down at the pavestone. 'I know, this must look . . . unusual. Where everywhere else in the city people are putting things back, here I am . . .'

The old man approached. 'Not in the least, Acquitor – you were an Acquitor, were you not?'

'Uh, yes. I was. Not any more. I'm Seren Pedac.'

'No, not in the least, then, Seren Pedac.'

She gestured at the centre stone. 'This one defeats me, I'm afraid.'

'Not for long, I suspect, no matter what. You seem very determined.'

She smiled, and was startled by how odd it felt. When had she last smiled – no, she would not think back to that.

'But you should be careful,' the old man continued.

'Here, let me try.'

'Thank you,' she said, stepping back to give him room.

The old man promptly bent the bar.

She stared.

Cursing, he set it aside, then crouched down to dig his fingers into one side of the enormous stone block.

And pulled it into its edge, then, hands going out to the sides, he lifted it with a grunt, pivoted, staggered two steps, and laid it down atop the others. He straightened, brushing dust from his hands. 'Hire a couple of young men to put it back when you're done.'

'How – no, well. But. How do you know I intend to put it back?'

He glanced across at her. 'Do not grieve overlong, Seren Pedac. You are needed. Your life is needed.'

And then he bowed to her and left.

She stared after him.

She needed to go inside now, to collect the stone spear and his sword, to bury the weapons beneath the threshold of her home, her terribly empty home.

Yet still she hesitated.

And the old man suddenly returned. 'I found the Errant,' he said. 'We had much to . . . discuss. It is how I learned of you, and of what happened.'

*What? Is he addled, then? One of the Errant's new zealots?* She made to turn away—

'No, wait! Seren Pedac. You have all there is of him, all that's left. Cherish it, please. Seren Pedac, cherish it. And yourself. Please.'

And, as he walked away, it was as if his words had blessed her in some unaccountable way.

*'You have all there is of me, all that's left . . .'*

Unconsciously, her hand lifted to settle on her stomach.

Before too long, she would be doing a lot of that.

This ends the seventh tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

# GLOSSARY

**Acquitor**: a sanctioned position as guide/factor when dealing with non-Letherii people

**Ahkrata**: a Barghast tribe

**Andara**: temple of the cult of the Black-Winged Lord

**Arapay**: the easternmost tribe of Tiste Edur

**Artisan Battalion**: a military unit in Lether

**Atri-Preda**: military commander who governs a city, town or territory

**Awl**: a town in Lether. Also the name of a tribe

**Awl'dan**: grasslands east of Drene

**Barahn**: a Barghast tribe

**Barghast**: pastoral nomadic warrior people

**Bast Fulmar**: battle site

**Beneda**: a Tiste Edur tribe

**Blue Style Steel**: a Letherii steel once used for weapons

**Bluerose**: a subjugated nation in Lether

**Bluerose Battalion**: a military unit in Lether

**Caladara whip**: an Awl weapon

**Cabil**: an archipelago nation south of Perish

**Ceda**: a High Mage of the Letherii Empire

**Cedance**: a chamber of tiles representing the Holds, in Letheras

**Crimson Rampant Brigade**: a military unit in Lether

**Den-Ratha**: a Tiste Edur tribe

**Docks**: coin of Lether

**Down Markets**: a district in Letheras

**Drene**: a Lether city east of Bluerose

**Emlava**: a sabre-toothed cat

**Eternal Domicile**: seat of Lether Emperor

**Faraed**: a subjugated people of Lether

**Fent**: a subjugated people of Lether

**Finadd**: equivalent of captain in the Letherii military

***Froth Wolf:*** Adjunct Tavore's command ship

**Gilani**: tribe in Seven Cities

**Gilk**: a Barghast tribe

**Harridict Brigade**: a Lether military unit

**Hiroth**: a Tiste Edur tribe

**Ilgres**: a Barghast tribe

**Jheck**: a northern tribe

**Just Wars**: mythical conflict between the Tiste Liosan and the Forkrul Assail

**K'risnan**: Tiste Edur sorcerers

**Kenryll'ah**: demon nobility

**Liberty Consign**: a loose consortium of businesses in Lether

**Lupe fish**: a large carnivorous fish of Lether River

**Meckros**: a seafaring people

**Merchants' Battalion**: a Lether military unit

**Merude**: a Tiste Edur tribe

**Nerek**: a subjugated people of Lether

**Nith'rithal**: a Barghast tribe

**Obsidian Throne**: traditional throne of Bluerose

**Onyx Wizards**: Andii wizards ruling the Andara of Bluerose

**Patriotists**: Lether Empire's secret police

**Pamby Doughty**: comic poem

**Preda**: equivalent of a general or commander in Letherii military

**Quillas Canal**: a main canal in Letheras

**Rat Catchers' Guild**: a now outlawed guild in Lether

**Refugium**: a magical realm surrounded by Omtose Phellack

**Rhinazan**: a winged lizard

**Rise (The)**: Shake title

**Rygtha**: Awl crescent axe

**Scale House**: centre of Rat Catchers' Guild in Letheras

**Senan**: a Barghast tribe

**Settle Lake**: a decrepit lake in the centre of Letheras

**Second Maiden Fort**: a penal island now independent

**Shake**: a subjugated people in the Lether Empire

**Shore (The)**: religion of the Shake

**Sollanta**: a Tiste Edur tribe

**Thrones of War**: Perish ships

**Twilight**: Shake title

**Watch (The)**: Shake title

**Verdith'anath**: the Jaghut Bridge of Death

**Zorala Snicker**: comic poem

STEVEN ERIKSON'S
EPIC FANTASY
SEQUENCE
CONTINUES IN

**TOLL THE HOUNDS**

*published by Bantam Press. Here's the Prologue as a taster . . .*

# PROLOGUE

'Speak truth, grow still, until the water is clear between us.'

*Meditations of the Tiste Andii*

'I have no name for this town,' the ragged man said, his hands plucking at the frayed hems of what had once been an opulent cloak. Coiled and tucked into his braided belt was a length of leather leash, rotting and tattered. 'It needs a name, I think,' he continued, his voice raised to be heard above the vicious fighting of the dogs, 'yet I find a certain failing of imagination, and no one seems much interested.'

The woman standing now at his side, to whom he companionably addressed these remarks, had but newly arrived. Of her life in the time before, very little remained. She had not owned a dog, yet she had found herself staggering down the high street of this decrepit, strange town, clutching a leash against which a foul-tempered brute tugged and lunged at every passer-by. The rotted leather had finally parted, freeing the beast to bolt forward, launching an attack upon this man's own dog.

The two animals were now trying to kill each other in the middle of the street, their audience naught but their presumed owners. Dust had given way to blood and tufts of hide.

'There was a garrison, once, three soldiers who didn't know each other,' the man said. 'But one by one they left.'

'I never owned a dog before,' she replied, and it was with a start that she realized that these were the first words she had uttered since...well, since the time before.

'Nor I,' admitted the man. 'And until now, mine was the only dog in town. Oddly enough, I never grew fond of the wretched beast.'

'How long have you...er...been here?'

'I have no idea, but it seems like forever.'

She looked round, then nodded. 'Me too.'

'Alas, I believe your pet has died.'

'Oh! So it has.' She frowned at the broken leash in her hand. 'I suppose I won't be needing a new one, then.'

'Don't be too certain of that,' the man said. 'We seem to repeat things here. Day after day. But listen, you can have mine – I never use it, as you can see.'

She accepted the coiled leash. 'Thank you.' She walked out to where her dead dog was lying, more or less torn to pieces. The victor was crawling back towards its master leaving a trail of blood.

Everything seemed knocked strangely askew, including, she realized, her own impulses. She crouched down and gently lifted her dead dog's mangled head to work the loop over until it encircled the torn neck. Then she lowered the bloody, spit-lathered head back down and straightened, holding the leash loose in her right hand.

The man joined her. 'Aye, it's all rather confusing, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'And we thought life was confusing.'

She shot him a glance. 'So we are dead, aren't we?'

'I think so.'

'Then, I don't understand. I was to have been interred in a crypt. A fine, solid crypt – I saw it myself. Richly appointed and proof against thieves, with casks of wine and seasoned meats and fruit for the journey.' She

gestured down at the rags she was wearing. 'I was to be dressed in my finest clothes, wearing all my jewellery.'

He had been watching her during this. 'Wealthy, then.'

'Yes!' She looked back down at the dead dog on the end of the leash.

'Not anymore.'

She glared across at him, then realized that such anger was, well, pointless. 'I have never seen this town before. It seems to be falling apart.'

'Aye, it's all falling apart. You have that right.'

'I don't know where I live – oh, that sounds odd, doesn't it?' She looked round again. 'It's all dust and rot, and is that a storm coming?' She pointed down the main street towards the horizon, where heavy, strangely luminous clouds now gathered above denuded hills.

They stared at them for a time. The clouds seemed to be raining tears of jade.

'I was once a priest,' the man said, as his dog edged up against his feet and laid there, gasping with blood dripping from its mouth. 'Every time we saw a storm coming, we closed our eyes and sang all the louder.'

She regarded him with some surprise. 'You were a priest? Then . . . why are you not with your god?'

The man shrugged. 'If I knew the answer to that, the delusion I once possessed – of enlightenment – would in truth be mine.' He suddenly straightened. 'Oh, we have a visitor.'

Approaching with a hitched gait was a tall figure, so desiccated that its limbs seemed little more than tree roots; its face naught but rotted, weathered skin stretched over bone. Long grey hair drifted out unbound from a pallid, peeling scalp.

'I suppose,' the woman muttered, 'I need to get used to such sights.'

Her companion said nothing, and they both watched as the gaunt, limping creature staggered past. As they turned to follow its progress, they now saw

another stranger, hooded and cloaked in frayed dark grey, and of a height to match the other.

Neither seemed to take note of their audience, as the hooded one said, 'Edgewalker.'

'You have called me here,' said the one named Edgewalker, 'to . . . mitigate.'

'I have.'

'This has been a long time coming.'

'You might think that way, Edgewalker.'

The grey-haired man – who was clearly long dead – cocked his head and asked, 'Why now?'

The hooded figure turned slightly, and the woman thought he might be looking down on the dead dog. 'Disgust,' he replied.

A soft rasping laugh emerged from Edgewalker.

'What ghastly place is this?' hissed a new voice, and the woman saw a shape, no more than a smeared blur of shadows, whisper out from an alley in flowing silence, though he seemed to be hobbling on a cane, and all at once there were huge beasts – two, four, five – padding out around the newcomer.

A grunt from the priest beside the woman. 'Hounds of Shadow. Oh, but could my god witness this!'

'Perhaps it does, through your eyes.'

'Oh, I doubt that.'

Edgewalker and his hooded companion watched this shadowy form approach, short and wavering, then growing more solid. Black stick cane thumping on the dirt street, raising puffs of dust. The Hounds wandered away, heads lowered as they sniffed the ground. None approached the carcass of the woman's dog, nor the gasping beast at the feet of her new found friend.

The hooded one said, 'Ghastly? I suppose it is. A necropolis of sorts, Shadowthrone. A village of the discarded. Both timeless and, yes, useless. Such places,' he continued, 'are ubiquitous.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Shadowthrone. 'Look at us, waiting. Waiting. Oh, if I were one for decorum and propriety!'

A sudden giggle. 'If any of us were!'

All at once the Hounds returned, hackles raised, gazes keen on something far up the main street.

'One more,' whispered the priest beside her. 'One more and the last, yes.'

'Will all this happen again?' she asked him, as sudden fear ripped through her. Someone is coming. Oh gods, someone is coming. 'Tomorrow? Tell me!'

'I would imagine not,' the priest said after a moment. He swung his gaze to the dog carcass lying in the dust. 'No,' he said again, 'I imagine not.'

From the hills, thunder and jade rain slashing down like the arrows from ten thousand battles. From down the street, the sudden rumble of carriage wheels.

She turned at that latter sound and smiled. 'Oh,' she said in relief, 'here comes my ride.'

He had once been a wizard of Pale, driven by desperation into betrayal. But Anomander Rake had not been interested in desperation, nor any other excuse Ditch and his comrades might have proffered. Betrayers to the Son of Darkness kissed the sword Dragnipur, and somewhere among this legion toiling in the perpetual gloom there were faces he would recognise, eyes that could meet his own, and what would he see in them?

Only what he gave back. Desperation was not enough.

These were rare thoughts, no more nor less unwelcome than so many others, mocking him as in their freedom they drifted in and out, and when nowhere close, why, they perhaps floated through alien skies, riding warm winds soft as laughter. What could not escape was Ditch himself and that

which he could see on all sides. This oily mud and its sharp black stones that cut through the rotted soles of his boots, the deathly damp air that layered a grimy film upon the skin, as if the world itself was fevered and slick with sweat. The faint cries, strangely ever distant to Ditch's ears, and, much nearer, the groan and crunch of the massive engine of wood and bronze, the muted squeal of chains.

Onward, ever onward, even as the storm behind them drew closer, cloud piling on cloud, silver and roiling and shot through with twisting spears of iron. Ash had begun to rain down on them, unceasing now, each flake cold as snow. Yet this was a sludge that did not melt, instead churning into the mud until it seemed they walked through a field of slag and tailings.

Although a wizard, Ditch was neither small nor frail. There was a roughness to him that had made others think of thugs and alley-pouncers, back in the life that had been before. His features were heavy, angular and indeed, brutish. He had been a strong man, but this was no reward – not here, not chained to the Burden. Not within the dark soul of Dragnipur.

The strain was unbearable, yet bear it he did. The way ahead was infinite, screaming of madness, yet he held onto his own sanity as might a drowning man clinging to a frayed rope, and he dragged himself onward, step by step. Iron shackles made his limbs weep blood, with no hope of surcease. Figures caked in mud plodded to either side, and beyond them, vague in the gloom, countless others.

Was there comfort in shared fate? The question alone invited hysterical laughter, a plunge into insanity's precious oblivion. No, surely there was no such comfort, beyond the mutual recognition of folly, ill luck and obstinate stupidity, and these traits could not serve camaraderie. Besides, one's companions to either side were in the habit of changing at a moment's notice, one hapless fool replacing another in a grainy, blurred swirl.

Heaving on the chains, to keep the Burden in motion, this nightmarish flight left no energy – no time – for conversation. And so Ditch ignored the hand buffeting his shoulder, the first time, the second time. The third time, however, proved hard enough to send the wizard staggering to one side. Swearing, he twisted round to glare at the one now walking at his side.

Once, long ago, he might have flinched upon seeing such an apparition. His heart would have lurched in terror.

The demon was huge, hulking. Its once royal blood availed it no privilege here in Dragnipur. Ditch saw that the creature was carrying the fallen, the failed, gathering to itself a score or more bodies and the chains attached to them. Muscles strained, bunched and twisted as the demon pulled itself forward. Scrawny bodies hanging limp, crowded like cordwood under each arm. One, still conscious though her head lolled, rode its broad back like a newborn ape, glazed eyes sliding across the wizard's face.

'You fool,' Ditch snarled. 'Throw 'em into the bed!'

'No room,' piped the demon in a high, childish voice.

But the wizard had used up his sympathy. For the demon's sake, it should have left the fallen behind, but then, of course, they would all feel the added weight, the pathetic drag on the chains. Still, what if this one fell? What if that extraordinary strength and will gave way? 'Curse the fool!' Ditch growled. 'Why doesn't he kill a few more dragons, damn him!'

'We fail,' said the demon.

Ditch wanted to howl at that. Was it not obvious to them all? But that quavering voice was both bemused and forlorn, and it struck through to his heart. 'I know, friend. Not long now.'

'And then?'

Ditch shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Who does?'

Again the wizard had no answer.

The demon persisted. 'We must find one who does. I am going now. But I will return. Do not pity me, please.'

A sudden swirl, grey and black, and now some bear-like beast was beside him, too weary, too mindless to even lunge at him in the way some creatures still did.

'You've been here too long, friend,' Ditch said to it.

Who does?

An interesting question. Did anyone know what would happen when the chaos caught them? Anyone here in Dragnipur?

In his first moments following his kissing the sword, inbetween his frenzied attempts at escape, his shrieks of despair, he had flung questions at everyone. Why, he'd even sought to accost a Hound, but it had been too busy lunging at its own chains, froth fizzing from its massive jaws, and had very nearly trampled him, and he'd never seen it again.

But someone had replied. Someone had spoken to him. About something ?oh, he could not recall much more than that. Beyond a name, a single name.

Draconus.

She had witnessed many things in this interminable interlude in her career, but none more frustrating than the escape of two Hounds of Shadow. It was not for one as Apsal'ara, Lady of Thieves, to so besmirch her existence with the laborious indignity of tugging on a chain for all eternity. Shackles were to be escaped, burdens deftly avoided.

From the moment of her first stumbling arrival, she had set upon herself the task of breaking the chains binding her in this dreaded realm, but this was a task made virtually impossible if cursed to ever pull the damned wagon. And she had no desire to witness once more the horrible train at the very end of the chains, the abraded lumps of still-living meat dragging across the gouged muddy ground, the flash of an open eye, a flopping nub of a limb straining towards her, a terrible army of the failed, the ones who surrendered and the ones whose strength gave out.

No, Apsal'ara had worked her way closer to the enormous wagon, eventually finding herself trudging beside one of the huge wooden wheels. Then she had lagged in her pace until just behind that wheel. From there, inward, slipping beneath the creaking bed with its incessant rain of brown water, was blood and the wastes that came of rotting but still living flesh.

Dragging the chain behind her she had worked her way onto a shelf of the undercarriage, just above the front axle, wedging herself in tight, legs drawn up, her back against slimy wood.

Fire had been the gift, the stolen gift, but there could be no flame in this sodden underworld. Failing that, there was . . . friction. She had begun working one length of chain across another.

How many years had it been? She had no idea. There was no hunger, no thirst. The chain sawed back and forth. There was a hint of heat, climbing link by link and into her hands. Had the iron softened? Was the metal worn with new, silvery grooves? She had long since stopped checking. The effort was enough. For so long, it had been enough.

Until those damned Hounds.

That, and the inescapable truth that the wagon had slowed, that now there were as many lying on its bed as there were still out in the gloom beyond, heaving desperately on their chains. She could hear the piteous groans, seeping down from the bed directly above her, of those trapped beneath the weight of countless others.

The Hounds had thundered against the sides of the wagon. The Hounds had plunged into the maw of darkness at the very centre.

There had been a stranger, an unchained stranger.

Taunting the Hounds – the Hounds! She remembered his face. Oh yes, his face. Even after he had vanished?

In the wake of all that, Apsal'ara had attempted to follow the beasts, only to be driven back by the immense cold of that portal – cold so fierce it destroyed flesh, colder even than Omtose Phellack. The cold of negation. Denial.

No greater curse than hope. A lesser creature would have wept then, would have surrendered, throwing herself beneath one of the wheels to be left dragging in the wagon's wake, nothing more than one more piece of wreckage, of crushed bone and mangled flesh scraping and tumbling in the

stony mud. Instead, she had returned to her private perch, where she resumed working the chains.

She had stolen the moon once.

She had stolen fire.

She had padded the silent arching halls of the city within Moon's Spawn.

She was the Lady of Thieves.

And a sword had stolen her life.

This will not do. This will not do.

Lying in its usual place on the flat rock beside the stream, the mangy three-legged dog lifted its head, the motion stirring flies into buzzing flight. A moment later, the beast rose. Scars covered its back, some deep enough to twist the muscles beneath. The dog lived in the village but was not of it. Nor was the animal one among the village's pack. It did not sleep outside the entrance to any hut; it allowed no one to come close. Even the tribe's horses would not draw near it.

There was, it was agreed, a deep bitterness in its eyes, and an even deeper sorrow. God-touched, the Uryd elders said, and this claim insured that the dog would never starve and would never be driven away. It would be tolerated, in the manner of all things God-touched.

Surprisingly lithe despite its missing leg, the dog now trotted through the village, down the length of its main avenue. When it came to the south end, it kept on going, down slope, wending through the moss-backed boulders and the bone piles that marked the refuse of the Uryd.

Its departure was noted by two girls still a year or more from their nights of passage into adulthood. There was a similarity to their features, and in their ages they were a close match, the times of their births mere days apart. Neither could be said to be loquacious. They shared the silent language common among twins, although they were not twins, and it seemed that, for them, this language was enough. And so, upon seeing the three-legged dog

leave the village, they exchanged a glance, set about gathering what supplies and weapons were near at hand, and then set out on the dog's trail.

Their departure was noted, but that was all.

South, down from the great mountains of home, where condors wheeled between the peaks and wolves howled when the winter winds came.

South, towards the lands of the hated children of the Nathii. Where dwelt the bringers of war and pestilence, the slayers and enslavers of the Teblor. Where the Nathii bred like lemmings until it seemed there would be no place left in the world for anyone or anything but them.

As with the three-legged dog, the two girls were fearless and resolute. Though they did not know it, such traits came from their father. Whom they had never met.

The dog did not look back, and when the girls caught up to it, the beast maintained its indifference. It was, as the elders had said, God-touched.

Back in the village, a mother and daughter were told of the flight of their children. The daughter wept. The mother did not.

Instead, there was heat in a low place of her body, and for a time, she was lost in remembrances.

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive . . .'

An empty plain beneath an empty night sky. A lone fire, so weak as to be nearly swallowed by the blackened, cracked stones encircling it. Seated on one of the two flat stones close to the hearth was a short, round man with short, greasy hair. Faded red waistcoat, beneath that a linen shirt with its stained once-white blousy cuffs erupting around his pudgy hands. The round face was flushed, reflecting the flickering flames. From the small knuckled chin dangled long black hairs – not enough to braid, alas – a new affectation he had taken to twirling and stroking when deep in thought, or even shallowly so. Indeed, when not thinking at all, but wishing to convey an impression of serious cogitation, should anyone regard him thoughtfully.

He stroked and twirled now as he frowned down into the fire before him.

What had that grey-haired bard sung? There on the modest stage in K'rul Bar earlier in the night, when he had watched on, content with his place in the glorious city he had saved more than once.

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive?

'I need to tell you something, Kruppe.'

The round man glanced up to find a shrouded figure seated on the other flat stone, reaching thin pale hands out to the flames. Kruppe cleared his throat, then said, 'It has been a long time since Kruppe last found himself perched as you see him now. Accordingly, Kruppe has long since concluded that you wish to tell him something of such vast import that no one but Kruppe is worthy to hear.'

A faint glitter from the darkness within the hood. 'I am not in this war.'

Kruppe stroked the rat tails of his beard, delighting himself by saying nothing.

'This surprises you?' the Elder God asked.

'Kruppe ever expects the unexpected, old friend. Why, could you ever expect otherwise? Kruppe is shocked. Yet, a thought arrives, launched brainward by a tug on this handsome beard. K'rul states he is not in the war. Yet, Kruppe suspects, he is nevertheless its prize.'

'Only you understand this, my friend,' the Elder God said, sighing. Then cocked its head. 'I had not noticed before, but you seem sad.'

'Sadness has many flavours, and it seems Kruppe has tasted them all.'

'Will you speak now of such matters? I am, I believe, a good listener.'

'Kruppe sees that you are sorely beset. Perhaps now is not the time.'

'That is no matter.'

'It is to Kruppe.'

K'rul glanced to one side and saw a figure approaching, grey-haired and gaunt.

Kruppe sang, 'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive . . . and the rest?'

The newcomer answered in a deep voice, 'Pushing into the cracks, there to abide.'

And the Elder God sighed.

'Join us, friend. Sit here by this fire, this scene paints the history of our kind, as you well know. A night, a hearth, and a tale to spin. Dear K'rul, dearest friend of Kruppe, hast thou ever seen Kruppe dance?'

The stranger sat. A wan face, an expression of sorrow and pain.

'No,' said K'rul. 'I think not. Not by limb, not by word.'

Kruppe's smile was muted, and something glistened in his eyes. 'Then, my friends, settle yourselves for this night. And witness.'

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# Toll The Hounds

A Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON

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This novel is dedicated
to the memory of my father,
R. S. Lundin, 1931–2007.
You are missed.

# Acknowledgements

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Love to Clare and Bowen, for everything.

# Darujhistan

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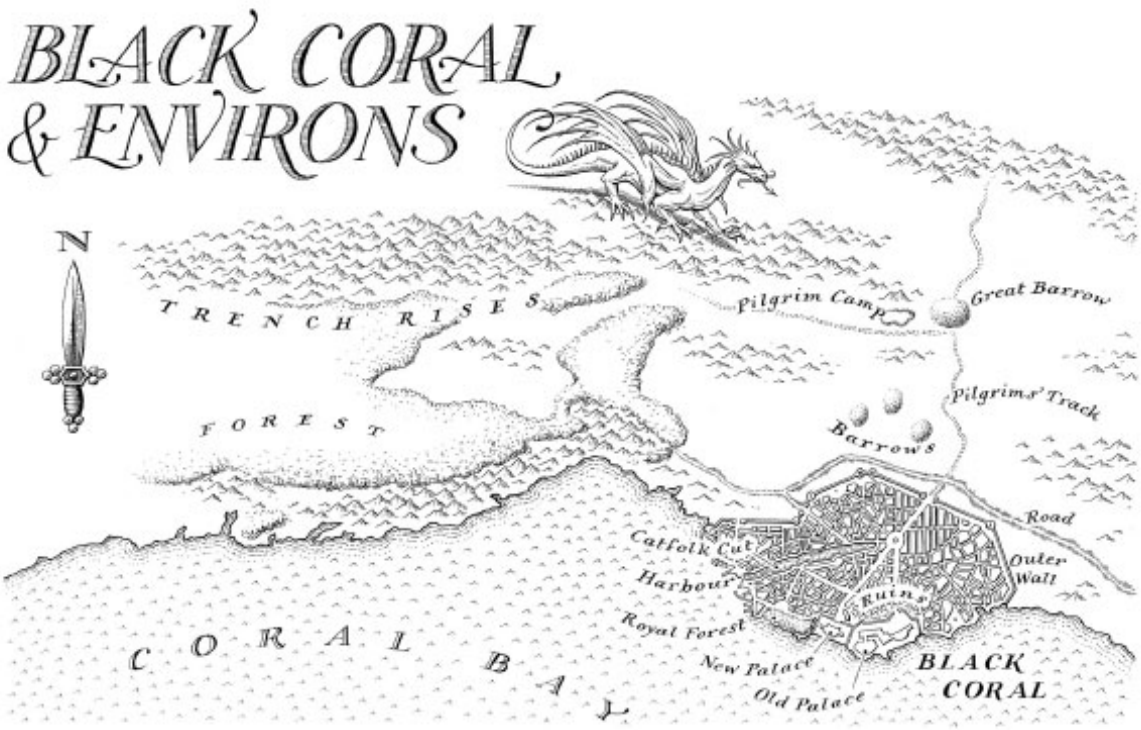
AZUR
TENDER ISLAND
Lighthouse
Mole
Worrytown
Jatem's Worry
SECOND TIER WALL
THIRD TIER WALL
ESTATE DISTRICT
GADAR QUARRY
Urs
Hinter Road
HILLS
Farms
N
1 Arms Quarter
2 Warden Barracks (City Watch)
3 Quip's Bar
4 Phoenix Inn
5 Borthen Park
6 Majesty Hill
7 Despot's Barbican
8 K'rul's Hill
9 Orr Estate
10 High Gallows Hill
11 Baruk's Estate
12 Simtal Estate
13 Hinter's Tower


BLACK CORAL
& ENVIRONS
N
TRENCH RISES
FOREST
Pilgrim Camp
Great Barrow
Pilgrims' Track
Barrows
Road
Catfolk Cut
Harbour
Outer Wall
Ruins
Royal Forest
New Palace
Old Palace
BLACK CORAL
CORAL BAY

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Cutter,** an assassin
**Scillara,** his companion
**Iskaral Pust,** High Priest of Shadow, the Magi, God of the Bhokarala
**Sister Spite,** a Soletaken
**Mogora,** Iskaral's occasional wife
**Barathol Mekhar,** a tourist
**Chaur,** a gentle man
**Mappo Runt,** a Trell

**Picker,** a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
**Blend,** a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
**Antsy,** a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
**Mallet,** a retired Bridgeburner and healer
**Bluepearl,** a retired Bridgeburner
**Fisher,** a bard, a regular at K'rul's Bar
**Duiker,** once the Malazan Empire's Imperial Historian

**Bellam Nom,** a young man
**Rallick Nom,** an awakened assassin
**Torvald Nom,** a cousin of Rallick
**Tiserra,** Torvald's wife
**Coll,** a Council Member in Darujhistan
**Estraysian D'Arle,** a Council Member in Darujhistan
**Hanut Orr,** a Council Member in Darujhistan, nephew of the late Turban Orr
**Shardan Lim,** a Council Member in Darujhistan
**Murillio,** a consort

**Kruppe,** a round little man
**Meese,** proprietor of the Phoenix Inn
**Irilta,** a regular at the Phoenix Inn
**Scurve,** barkeep at the Phoenix Inn
**Sulty,** server at the Phoenix Inn
**Challice,** wife of Vidikas, daughter of Estraysian D'Arle
**Gorlas Vidikas,** newest Council Member in Darujhistan, past Hero of the Fete
**Krute of Talient,** an agent of the Assassins' Guild
**Gaz,** a killer
**Thordy,** Gaz's wife

**Master Quell,** Trygalle Trade Guild navigator and sorceror
**Faint,** a shareholder
**Reccanto Ilk,** a shareholder
**Sweetest Sufferance,** a shareholder
**Glanno Tarp,** a shareholder
**Amby Bole,** a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder
**Jula Bole,** a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder
**Precious Thimble,** a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder

**Gruntle,** a caravan guard on extended leave
**Stonny Menackis,** owner of duelling school
**Harllo,** a child
**Bedek,** Harllo's 'uncle'
**Myrla,** Harllo's 'aunt'
**Snell,** a child
**Bainisk,** a worker in the mines
**Venaz,** a worker in the mines
**Scorch,** a newly hired bodyguard
**Leff,** a newly hired bodyguard
**Madrun,** a newly hired compound guard
**Lazan Door,** a newly hired compound guard
**Studlock (**or **Studious Lock),** a castellan

**Humble Measure,** a mysterious presence in Darujhistan's criminal underworld

**Chillbais,** a demon
**Baruk,** a member of the T'orrud Cabal
**Vorcan,** Mistress of the Assassins' Guild
**Seba Krafar,** Master of the Assassins' Guild
**Apsal'ara,** one of the Slain in Dragnipur
**Kadaspala,** one of the Slain in Dragnipur
**Derudan,** a witch of Tennes
**K'rul,** an Elder God
**Draconus,** one of the Slain within Dragnipur

**Korlat,** a Tiste Andii Soletaken
**Orfantal,** a Tiste Andii Soletaken, Korlat's brother
**Kallor,** a challenger
**Lady Envy,** a bystander
**Anomander Rake,** Son of Darkness, Knight of Darkness, Ruler of Black Coral
**Spinnock Durav,** a Tiste Andii
**Endest Silann,** a Tiste Andii wizard
**Caladan Brood,** a warlord
**Hood,** the God of Death
**Ditch,** one of the Slain in Dragnipur
**Samar Dev,** a witch
**Karsa Orlong,** a Teblor Toblakai warrior
**Traveller,** a stranger
**Shadowthrone,** the God of Shadow
**Cotillion,** The Rope, Patron God of Assassins
**Prophet Seech,** the High Priest of the Fallen One, once a middling artist named Munug
**Silanah,** an Eleint
**Crone,** a Great Raven
**Raest,** a Jaghut Tyrant (retired)
**Clip,** Mortal Sword of Darkness
**Nimander Golit,** a Tiste Andii

**Skintick,** a Tiste Andii
**Nenanda,** a Tiste Andii
**Aranatha,** a Tiste Andii
**Kedeviss,** a Tiste Andii
**Desra,** a Tiste Andii
**Sordiko Qualm,** a High Priestess
**Salind,** a High Priestess
**Seerdomin,** a resident of Black Coral
**Gradithan,** a thug
**Monkrat,** a mage
**Baran,** a Hound of Shadow
**Gear,** a Hound of Shadow
**Blind,** a Hound of Shadow
**Rood,** a Hound of Shadow
**Shan,** a Hound of Shadow
**Pallid,** a new Hound of Shadow
**Lock,** a new Hound of Shadow
**Edgewalker,** a wanderer
**Dog walkers,** two witnesses

# PROLOGUE

> Speak truth, grow still, until the water is
> clear between us.
>
> *Meditations of the Tiste Andii*

'I have no name for this town,' the ragged man said, hands plucking at the frayed hems of what had once been an opulent cloak. Coiled and tucked into his braided belt was a length of leather leash, rotting and tattered. 'It needs a name, I think,' he continued, voice raised to be heard above the vicious fighting of the dogs, 'yet I find a certain failing of imagination, and no one seems much interested.'

The woman standing now at his side, to whom he companionably addressed these remarks, had but newly arrived. Of her life in the time before, very little remained. She had not owned a dog, yet she had found herself staggering down the high street of this decrepit, strange town clutching a leash against which a foul-tempered brute tugged and lunged at every passer-by. The rotted leather had finally parted, freeing the beast to bolt forward, launching an attack upon this man's own dog.

The two animals were now trying to kill each other in the middle of the street, their audience none but their presumed owners. Dust had given way to blood and tufts of hide.

'There was a garrison, once, three soldiers who didn't know each other,' the man said. 'But one by one they left.'

'I never owned a dog before,' she replied, and it was with a start that she realized that these were the first words she had uttered since . . . well, since the time before.

'Nor I,' admitted the man. 'And until now, mine was the only dog in town. Oddly enough, I never grew fond of the wretched beast.'

'How long have you . . . er, been here?'

'I have no idea, but it seems like for ever.'

She looked round, then nodded. 'Me too.'

'Alas, I believe your pet has died.'

'Oh! So it has.' She frowned down at the broken leash in her hand. 'I suppose I won't be needing a new one, then.'

'Don't be too certain of that,' the man said. 'We seem to repeat things here. Day after day. But listen, you can have mine – I never use it, as you can see.'

She accepted the coiled leash. 'Thank you.' She took it out to where her dead dog was lying, more or less torn to pieces. The victor was crawling back towards its master leaving a trail of blood.

Everything seemed knocked strangely askew, including, she realized, her own impulses. She crouched down and gently lifted her dead dog's mangled head, working the loop over until it encircled the torn neck. Then she lowered the bloody, spit-lathered head back to the ground and straightened, holding the frayed leash loose in her right hand.

The man joined her. 'Aye, it's all rather confusing, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'And we thought life was confusing.'

She shot him a glance. 'So we *are* dead?'

'I think so.'

'Then I don't understand. I was to have been interred in a crypt. A fine, solid crypt – I saw it myself. Richly appointed and proof against thieves, with casks of wine and seasoned meats and fruit for the journey—' She

gestured down at the rags she was wearing. 'I was to be dressed in my finest clothes, wearing all my jewellery.'

He was watching her. 'Wealthy, then.'

'Yes.' She looked back down at the dead dog on the end of the leash.

'Not any more.'

She glared across at him, then realized that such anger was, well, pointless. 'I have never seen this town before. It looks to be falling apart.'

'Aye, it's all falling apart. You have that right.'

'I don't know where I live – oh, that sounds odd, doesn't it?' She looked round again. 'It's all dust and rot, and is that a storm coming?' She pointed down the main street towards the horizon, where heavy, strangely luminous clouds now gathered above denuded hills.

They stared at them for a time. The clouds seemed to be raining tears of jade.

'I was once a priest,' the man said, as his dog edged up against his feet and lay there, gasping, with blood dripping from its mouth. 'Every time we saw a storm coming, we closed our eyes and sang all the louder.'

She regarded him in some surprise. 'You were a priest? Then . . . why are you not with your god?'

The man shrugged. 'If I knew the answer to that, the delusion I once possessed – of enlightenment – would in truth be mine.' He suddenly straightened. 'Look, we have a visitor.'

Approaching with a hitched gait was a tall figure, so desiccated that its limbs seemed little more than tree roots, its face naught but rotted, weathered skin stretched over bone. Long grey hair drifted out unbound from a pallid, peeling scalp.

'I suppose,' the woman muttered, 'I need to get used to such sights.'

Her companion said nothing, and they both watched as the gaunt, limping creature staggered past, and as they turned to follow its progress they saw

another stranger, cloaked in frayed dark grey, hooded, of a height to match the other.

Neither seemed to take note of their audience, as the hooded one said, 'Edgewalker.'

'You have called me here,' said the one named Edgewalker, 'to . . . mitigate.'

'I have.'

'This has been a long time in coming.'

'You might think that way, Edgewalker.'

The grey-haired man – who was clearly long dead – cocked his head and asked, 'Why now?'

The hooded figure turned slightly, and the woman thought he might be looking down on the dead dog. 'Disgust,' he replied.

A soft rasping laugh from Edgewalker.

'What ghastly place is this?' hissed a new voice, and the woman saw a shape – no more than a smeared blur of shadows – whisper out from an alley, though he seemed to be hobbling on a cane, and all at once there were huge beasts, two, four, five, padding out around the newcomer.

A grunt from the priest beside the woman. 'Hounds of Shadow. Could my god but witness this!'

'Perhaps it does, through your eyes.'

'Oh, I doubt that.'

Edgewalker and his hooded companion watched the shadowy form approach. Short; wavering, then growing more solid. Black-stick cane thumping on the dirt street, raising puffs of dust. The Hounds wandered away, heads lowered as they sniffed the ground. None approached the carcass of the woman's dog, nor the gasping beast at the feet of her newfound friend.

The hooded one said, 'Ghastly? I suppose it is. A necropolis of sorts, Shadowthrone. A village of the discarded. Both timeless and, yes, useless. Such places,' he continued, 'are ubiquitous.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Shadowthrone. 'Look at us, waiting. *Waiting.* Oh, if I were one for decorum and propriety!' A sudden giggle. 'If any of us were!'

All at once the Hounds returned, hackles raised, gazes keen on something far up the main street.

'One more,' whispered the priest. 'One more and the last, yes.'

'Will all this happen again?' the woman asked him, as sudden fear ripped through her. *Someone is coming. Oh, gods, someone is coming.* 'Tomorrow? Tell me!'

'I would imagine not,' the priest said after a moment. He swung his gaze to the dog carcass lying in the dust. 'No,' he said again, 'I imagine not.'

From the hills, thunder and jade rain slashing down like the arrows from ten thousand battles. From down the street, the sudden rumble of carriage wheels.

She turned at that latter sound and smiled. 'Oh,' she said in relief, 'here comes my ride.'

He had once been a wizard of Pale, driven by desperation into betrayal. But Anomander Rake had not been interested in desperation, or any other excuse Ditch and his comrades might have proffered. Betrayers of the Son of Darkness kissed the sword Dragnipur, and somewhere among this legion toiling in the perpetual gloom there were faces he would recognize, eyes that could meet his own. And what would he see in them?

Only what he gave back. Desperation was not enough.

These were rare thoughts, no more or less unwelcome than any others, mocking him as in their freedom they drifted in and out; and when nowhere close, why, they perhaps floated through alien skies, riding warm winds soft as laughter. What could not escape was Ditch himself and that which he

could see on all sides. This oily mud and its sharp black stones that cut through the rotted soles of his boots; the deathly damp air that layered a grimy film upon the skin, as if the world itself was fevered and slick with sweat. The faint cries – strangely ever distant to Ditch's ears – and, much nearer, the groan and crunch of the massive engine of wood and bronze, the muted squeal of chains.

Onward, onward, even as the storm behind them drew closer, cloud piling on cloud, silver and roiling and shot through with twisting spears of iron. Ash had begun to rain down on them, unceasing now, each flake cold as snow, yet this was a sludge that did not melt, instead churning into the mud until it seemed they walked through a field of slag and tailings.

Although a wizard, Ditch was neither small nor frail. There was a roughness to him that had made others think of thugs and alley-pouncers, back in the life that had been before. His features were heavy, angular and, indeed, brutish. He had been a strong man, but this was no reward, not here, not chained to the Burden. Not within the dark soul of Dragnipur.

The strain was unbearable, yet bear it he did. The way ahead was infinite, screaming of madness, yet he held on to his own sanity as a drowning man might cling to a frayed rope, and he dragged himself onward, step by step. Iron shackles made his limbs weep blood, with no hope of surcease. Figures caked in mud plodded to either side, and beyond them, vague in the gloom, countless others.

Was there comfort in shared fate? The question alone invited hysterical laughter, a plunge into insanity's precious oblivion. No, surely there was no such comfort, beyond the mutual recognition of folly, ill luck and obstinate stupidity, and these traits could not serve camaraderie. Besides, one's companions to either side were in the habit of changing at a moment's notice, one hapless fool replacing another in a grainy, blurred swirl.

Heaving on the chains, to keep the Burden in motion, this nightmarish flight left no energy, no time, for con27 versation. And so Ditch ignored the hand buffeting his shoulder the first time, the second time. The third time, however, was hard enough to send the wizard staggering to one side. Swearing, he twisted round to glare at the one now walking at his side.

Once, long ago, he might have flinched back upon seeing such an apparition. His heart would have lurched in terror.

The demon was huge, hulking. Its once royal blood availed it no privilege here in Dragnipur. Ditch saw that the creature was carrying the fallen, the failed, gathering to itself a score or more bodies and the chains attached to them. Muscles strained, bunched and twisted as the demon pulled itself forward. Scrawny bodies hanging limp, crowded like cordwood under each arm. One, still conscious though her head lolled, rode its broad back like a newborn ape, glazed eyes sliding across the wizard's face.

'You fool,' Ditch snarled. 'Throw 'em into the bed!'

'No room,' piped the demon in a high, childish voice.

But the wizard had used up his sympathy. For the demon's sake, it should have left the fallen behind, but then, of course, they would all feel the added weight, the pathetic drag on the chains. Still, what if this one fell? What if that extraordinary strength and will gave way? 'Curse the fool!' Ditch growled. 'Why doesn't he kill a few more dragons, damn him!'

'We fail,' said the demon.

Ditch wanted to howl at that. Was it not obvious to them all? But that quavering voice was both bemused and forlorn, and it struck through to his heart. 'I know, friend.

Not long now.'

'And then?'

Ditch shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Who does?'

Again the wizard had no answer.

The demon persisted. 'We must find one who does. I am going now. But I will return. Do not pity me, please.'

A sudden swirl, grey and black, and now some bear-like beast was beside him, too weary, too mindless, to even lunge at him – as some creatures still

did.

'You've been here too long, friend,' Ditch said to it.

*Who does?*

An interesting question. Did anyone know what would happen when the chaos caught them? Anyone here in Dragnipur?

In his first moments following his kissing the sword, in between his frenzied attempts at escape, his shrieks of despair, he had flung questions at everyone – why, he'd even sought to accost a Hound, but it had been too busy lunging at its own chains, froth fizzing from its massive jaws, and had very nearly trampled him, and he'd never seen it again.

But someone had replied, someone had spoken to him. About something . . . oh, he could not recall much more than a name. A single name.

*Draconus.*

She had witnessed many things in this interminable interlude in her career, but none more frustrating than the escape of two Hounds of Shadow. It was not for one such as Apsal'ara, Lady of Thieves, to besmirch her existence with the laborious indignity of tugging on a chain for all eternity. Shackles were to be escaped, burdens deftly avoided.

From the moment of her first stumbling arrival, she had set upon herself the task of breaking the chains binding her in this dread realm, but this task was virtually impossible if one were cursed to ever pull the damned wagon. And she had no desire to witness again the horrible train at the very end of the chains, the abraded lumps of still living meat dragging across the gouged muddy ground, the flash of an open eye, a flopping nub of a limb straining towards her, a terrible army of the failed, the ones who surrendered and the ones whose strength gave out.

No, Apsal'ara had worked her way closer to the enormous wagon, eventually finding herself trudging beside one of the huge wooden wheels. Then she had lagged in her pace until just behind that wheel. From there, she moved inward, slipping beneath the creaking bed with its incessant rain of brown water, blood and the wastes that came of rotting but still living

flesh. Dragging the chain behind her she had worked her way on to a shelf of the undercarriage, just above the front axle, wedging herself in tight, legs drawn up, her back against slimy wood.

Fire had been the gift, the stolen gift, but there could be no flame in this sodden underworld. Failing that, there was . . . friction. She had begun working one length of chain across another.

How many years had it been? She had no idea. There was no hunger, no thirst. The chain sawed back and forth. There was a hint of heat, climbing link by link and into her hands. Had the iron softened? Was the metal worn with new, silvery grooves? She had long since stopped checking. The effort was enough. For so long, it had been enough.

Until those damned Hounds.

That, and the inescapable truth that the wagon had slowed, that now there were as many lying on its bed as there were still out in the gloom beyond, heaving desperate on their chains. She could hear the piteous groans, seeping down from the bed directly above her, of those trapped beneath the weight of countless others.

The Hounds had thundered against the sides of the wagon. The Hounds had plunged into the maw of darkness at the very centre.

There had been a stranger, an unchained stranger.

Taunting the Hounds – *the Hounds!* She remembered his face, oh yes, his face. Even after he had vanished . . .

In the wake of all that, Apsal'ara had attempted to follow the beasts, only to be driven back by the immense cold of that portal – cold so fierce it destroyed flesh, colder even than Omtose Phellack. The cold of *negation. Denial.*

No greater curse than hope. A lesser creature would have wept then, would have surrendered, throwing herself beneath one of the wheels to be left dragging in the wagon's wake, nothing more than one more piece of wreckage of crushed bone and mangled flesh, scraping and tumbling in the

stony mud. Instead, she had returned to her private perch, resumed working the chains.

She had stolen the moon once.

She had stolen fire.

She had padded the silent arching halls of the city within Moon's Spawn.

She was the Lady of Thieves.

And a sword had stolen her life.

*This will not do. This will not do.*

Lying in its usual place on the flat rock beside the stream, the mangy dog lifted its head, the motion stirring insects into buzzing flight. A moment later, the beast rose. Scars covered its back, some deep enough to twist the muscles beneath. The dog lived in the village but was not of it. Nor was the animal one among the village's pack. It did not sleep outside the entrance to any hut; it allowed no one to come close. Even the tribe's horses would not draw near it.

There was, it was agreed, a deep bitterness in its eyes, and an even deeper sorrow. God-touched, the Uryd elders said, and this claim ensured that the dog would never starve and would never be driven away. It would be tolerated, in the manner of all things god-touched.

Surprisingly lithe despite its mangled hip, the dog now trotted through the village, down the length of the main avenue. When it came to the south end, it kept on going, downslope, wending through the moss-backed boulders and the bone-piles that marked the refuse of the Uryd.

Its departure was noted by two girls still a year or more from their nights of passage into adulthood. There was a similarity to their features, and in their ages they were a close match, the times of their births mere days apart. Neither could be said to be loquacious. They shared the silent language common among twins, although they were not twins, and it seemed that, for them, this language was enough. And so, upon seeing the dog leave the

village, they exchanged a glance, set about gathering what supplies and weapons were near at hand, and then set out on the beast's trail.

Their departure was noted, but that was all.

South, down from the great mountains of home, where condors wheeled between the peaks and wolves howled when the winter winds came.

South, towards the lands of the hated children of the Nathii, where dwelt the bringers of war and pestilence, the slayers and enslavers of the Teblor. Where the Nathii bred like lemmings until it seemed there would be no place left in the world for anyone or anything but them.

Like the dog, the two girls were fearless and resolute.

Though they did not know it, such traits came from their father, whom they had never met.

The dog did not look back, and when the girls caught up to it the beast maintained its indifference. It was, as the elders had said, god-touched.

Back in the village, a mother and daughter were told of the flight of their children. The daughter wept. The mother did not. Instead, there was heat in a low place of her body, and, for a time, she was lost in remembrances.

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive . . .'

An empty plain beneath an empty night sky. A lone fire, so weak as to be nearly swallowed by the blackened, cracked stones encircling it. Seated on one of the two flat stones close to the hearth, a short, round man with sparse, greasy hair. Faded red waistcoat, over a linen shirt with stained once-white blousy cuffs erupting around the pudgy hands. The round face was flushed, reflecting the flickering flames. From the small knuckled chin dangled long black hairs – not enough to braid, alas – a new affectation he had taken to twirling and stroking when deep in thought, or even shallowly so. Indeed, when not thinking at all, but wishing to convey an impression of serious cogitation, should anyone regard him thoughtfully.

He stroked and twirled now as he frowned down into the fire before him.

What had that grey-haired bard sung? There on the modest stage in K'rul's Bar earlier in the night, when he had watched on, content with his place in the glorious city he had saved more than once?

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive . . .'

'I need to tell you something, Kruppe.'

The round man glanced up to find a shrouded figure seated on the other flat stone, reaching thin pale hands out to the flames. Kruppe cleared his throat, then said, 'It has been a long time since Kruppe last found himself perched as you see him now. Accordingly, Kruppe had long since concluded that you wished to tell him something of such vast import that none but Kruppe is worthy to hear.'

A faint glitter from the darkness within the hood. 'I am not in this war.'

Kruppe stroked the rat-tails of his beard, delighting himself by saying nothing.

'This surprises you?' the Elder God asked.

'Kruppe ever expects the unexpected, old friend. Why, could you ever expect otherwise? Kruppe is shocked. Yet, a thought arrives, launched brainward by a tug on this handsome beard. K'rul states he is not in the war. Yet, Kruppe suspects, he is nevertheless its prize.'

'Only you understand this, my friend,' the Elder God said, sighing. Then cocked its head. 'I had not noticed before, but you seem sad.'

'Sadness has many flavours, and it seems Kruppe has tasted them all.'

'Will you speak now of such matters? I am, I believe, a good listener.'

'Kruppe sees that you are sorely beset. Perhaps now is not the time.'

'That is no matter.'

'It is to Kruppe.'

K'rul glanced to one side, and saw a figure approaching, grey-haired, gaunt.

Kruppe sang, "'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive" . . . and the rest?'

The newcomer answered in a deep voice, "'. . . pushing into cracks, there to abide.'"

And the Elder God sighed.

'Join us, friend,' said Kruppe. 'Sit here by this fire: this scene paints the history of our kind, as you well know. A night, a hearth, and a tale to spin. Dear K'rul, dearest friend of Kruppe, hast thou ever seen Kruppe dance?'

The stranger sat. A wan face, an expression of sorrow and pain.

'No,' said K'rul. 'I think not. Not by limb, not by word.'

Kruppe's smile was muted, and something glistened in his eyes. 'Then, my friends, settle yourselves for this night. And *witness.'*

# BOOK ONE

# VOW TO THE SUN

This creature of words cuts
To the quick and gasp, dart away
The spray of red rain
Beneath a clear blue sky
Shock at all that is revealed
What use now this armour
When words so easy slant between?

This god of promises laughs
At the wrong things, wrongly timed
Unmaking all these sacrifices
In deliberate malice
Recoil like a soldier routed
Even as retreat is denied
Before corpses heaped high in walls

You knew this would come
At last and feign nothing, no surprise
To find this cup filled
With someone else's pain
It's never as bad as it seems
The taste sweeter than expected
When you squat in a fool's dream

So take this belligerence
Where you will, the dogged cur
Is the charge of my soul
To the centre of the street
Spinning round all fangs bared
Snapping at thirsty spears
Thrust cold and purged of your hands

*Hunting Words*
Brathos of Black Coral

# CHAPTER ONE

Oh frail city!
Where strangers arrive
Pushing into cracks
There to abide

Oh blue city!
Old friends gather sighs
At the foot of docks
After the tide

Uncrowned city!
Where sparrows alight
In spider tracks
On sills well high

Doomed city!
Closing comes the night
History awakens
Here to abide

*Frail Age*
Fisher kel Tath

Surrounded in a city of blue fire, she stood alone on the balcony. The sky's darkness was pushed away, an unwelcome guest on this the first night of the Gedderone Fete. Throngs filled the streets of Darujhistan, happily riotous, good-natured in the calamity of one year's ending and another's beginning. The night air was humid and pungent with countless scents.

There had been banquets. There had been unveilings of eligible young men and maidens. Tables laden with exotic foods, ladies wrapped in silks, men and women in preposterous uniforms all glittering gilt – a city with no standing army bred a plethora of private militias and a chaotic proliferation of high ranks held, more or less exclusively, by the nobility.

Among the celebrations she had attended this evening, on the arm of her husband, she had not once seen a real officer of Darujhistan's City Watch, not one genuine soldier with a dusty cloak-hem, with polished boots bearing scars, with a sword-grip of plain leather and a pommel gouged and burnished by wear. Yet she had seen, bound high on soft, well-fed arms, torcs in the manner of decorated soldiers among the Malazan army – soldiers from an empire that had, not so long ago, provided for Darujhistan mothers chilling threats to belligerent children. *'Malazans, child! Skulking in the night to steal foolish children! To make you slaves for their terrible Empress – yes! Here in this very city!'*

But the torcs she had seen this night were not the plain bronze or faintly etched silver of genuine Malazan decorations and signifiers of rank, such as appeared like relics from some long-dead cult in the city's market stalls. No, these had been gold, studded with gems, the blue of sapphire being the commonest hue even among the coloured glass, blue like the blue fire for which the city was famous, blue to proclaim some great and brave service to Darujhistan itself.

Her fingers had pressed upon one such torc, there on her husband's arm, although there was real muscle beneath it, a hardness to match the contemptuous look in his eyes as he surveyed the clusters of nobility in the vast humming hall, with the proprietary air he had acquired since attaining the Council. The contempt had been there long before and if anything had grown since his latest and most triumphant victory.

Daru gestures of congratulation and respect had swirled round them in their stately passage through the crowds, and with each acknowledgement her husband's face had grown yet harder, the arm beneath her fingers drawing ever tauter, the knuckles of his hands whitening above his sword-belt where the thumbs were tucked into braided loops in the latest fashion among duellists. Oh, he revelled in being among them now; indeed, in being above many of them. But for Gorlas Vidikas, this did not mean he had to like any of them. The more they fawned, the deeper his contempt, and that he would have been offended without their obsequy was a contradiction, she suspected, that a man like her husband was not wont to entertain.

The nobles had eaten and drunk, and stood and posed and wandered and paraded and danced themselves into swift exhaustion, and now the banquet halls and staterooms echoed with naught but the desultory ministrations of servants. Beyond the high walls of the estates, however, the common folk rollicked still in the streets. Masked and half naked, they danced on the cobbles – the riotous whirling steps of the Flaying of Fander – as if dawn would never come, as if the hazy moon itself would stand motionless in the abyss in astonished witness to their revelry. City Watch patrols simply stood back and observed, drawing dusty cloaks about their bodies, gauntlets rustling as they rested hands on truncheons and swords.

Directly below the balcony where she stood, the fountain of the unlit garden chirped and gurgled to itself, buffered by the estate's high, solid walls from the raucous festivities they had witnessed during the tortured carriage ride back home. Smeared moonlight struggled in the softly swirling pool surrounding the fountain.

The blue fire was too strong this night, too strong even for the mournful moon. Darujhistan itself was a sapphire, blazing in the torc of the world.

And yet its beauty, and all its delighted pride and its multitudinous voice, could not reach her tonight.

This night, Lady Vidikas had seen her future. Each and every year of it. There on her husband's hard arm. And the moon, well, it looked like a thing of the past, a memory dimmed by time, yet it had taken her back.

To a balcony much like this one in a time that now seemed very long ago.

Lady Vidikas, who had once been Challice Estraysian, had just seen her future. And was discovering, here in this night and standing against this rail, that the past was a better place to be.

Talk about the worst night yet to run out of Rhivi flatbread. Swearing under her breath, Picker pushed her way through the crowds of the Lakefront market, the mobs of ferociously hungry, drunk revellers, using her elbows when she needed to and glowering at every delirious smile swung her way, and came out eventually at the mouth of a dingy alley heaped ankle-deep in rubbish. Somewhere just to the south of Borthen Park. Not quite the route back to the bar she would have preferred, but the fête was in full frenzy.

Wrapped package of flatbread tucked under her left arm, she paused to tug loose the tangles of her heavy cloak, scowled on seeing a fresh stain from a careless passer-by – some grotesque Gadrobi sweetcake – tried wiping it off which only made it worse, then, her mood even fouler, set out through the detritus.

With the Lady's pull, Bluepearl and Antsy had no doubt fared better in finding Saltoan wine and were probably even now back at K'rul's. And here she was, twelve streets and two wall passages away with twenty or thirty thousand mad fools in between. Would her companions wait for her? Not a chance. Damn Blend and her addiction to Rhivi flatbread! That and her sprained ankle had conspired to force Picker out here on the first night of the fête – if that ankle truly *was* sprained, and she had her doubts since Mallet had just squinted down at the offending appendage, then shrugged.

Mind you, that was about as much as anyone had come to expect from Mallet. He'd been miserable since the retirement, and the chance of the sun's rising any time in the healer's future was about as likely as Hood's forgetting to tally the count. And it wasn't as if he was alone in his misery, was it?

But where was the value in feeding her ill temper with all these well-chewed thoughts?

Well, it made her feel better, that's what.

Dester Thrin, wrapped tight in black cloak and hood, watched the big-arsed woman kicking her way through the rubbish at the other end of the alley. He'd picked her up coming out of the back door of K'rul's Bar, the culmination of four nights positioned in the carefully chosen, darkness-shrouded vantage point from which he could observe that narrow postern.

His clan-master had warned that the targets were all ex-soldiers, but Dester Thrin had seen little to suggest that any of them had kept fit and trim. They were old, sagging, rarely sober, and this one, well, she wore that huge, thick woollen cloak because she was getting heavy and it clearly made her self-conscious.

Following her through the crowds had been relatively easy – she was a head taller than the average Gadrobi, and the route she took to this decrepit Rhivi market in Lakefront seemed to deliberately avoid the Daru streets, some strange affectation that would, in a very short time, prove fatal.

Dester's own Daru blood had permitted him a clear view of his target, pushing purposefully through the heaving press of celebrants.

He set out to traverse the alley once his target exited at the far end. Swiftly padding at a hunter's pace, he reached the alley mouth and edged out, in time to see the woman move into the passageway through Second Tier Wall, with the tunnel through Third just beyond.

The Guild's succession wars, following the disappearance of Vorcan, had finally been settled, with only a minimum amount of spilled blood. And Dester was more or less pleased with the new Grand Master, who was both vicious and clever where most of the other aspirants had been simply vicious. At last, an assassin of the Guild did not have to be a fool to feel some optimism regarding the future.

This contract was a case in point. Straightforward, yet one sure to earn Dester and the others of his clan considerable prestige upon its summary completion.

He brushed his gloved hands across the pommels of his daggers, the weapons slung on baldrics beneath his arms. Ever reassuring, those twin

blades of Daru steel with their ferules filled with the thick, pasty poison of Moranth tralb.

Poison was now the preferred insurance for a majority of the Guild's street killers, and indeed for more than a few who scuttled Thieves' Road across the rooftops. There'd been an assassin, close to Vorcan herself, who had, on a night of betrayal against his own clan, demonstrated the deadliness of fighting without magic. Using poison, the assassin had proved the superiority of such mundane substances in a single, now legendary night of blood.

Dester had heard that some initiates in some clans had raised hidden shrines to honour Rallick Nom, creating a kind of cult whose adherents employed secret gestures of mutual recognition within the Guild. Of course, Seba Krafar, the new Grand Master, had in one of his very first pronouncements outlawed the cult, and there had been a cull of sorts, with five suspected cult leaders greeting the dawn with smiling throats.

Still, Dester had since heard enough hints to suggest that the cult was far from dead. It had just burrowed deeper.

In truth, no one knew which poisons Rallick Nom had used, but Dester believed it was Moranth tralb, since even the smallest amount in the bloodstream brought unconsciousness, then a deeper coma that usually led to death. Larger quantities simply speeded up the process and were a sure path through Hood's Gate.

The big-arsed woman lumbered on.

Four streets from K'rul's Bar – if she was taking the route he believed she was taking – there'd be a long, narrow alley to walk up, the inside face of Third Tier Wall Armoury on the left, and on the right the high wall of the bath-house thick and solid with but a few scattered, small windows on upper floors, making the unlit passage dark.

He would kill her there.

Perched on a corner post's finial at one end of the high wall, Chillbais stared with stony eyes on the tattered wilds beyond. Behind him was an

overgrown garden with a shallow pond recently rebuilt but already unkempt, and toppled columns scattered about, bearded in moss. Before him, twisted trees and straggly branches with crumpled dark leaves dangling like insect carcasses, the ground beneath rumpled and matted with greasy grasses; a snaking path of tilted pavestones leading up to a squat, brooding house bearing no architectural similarity to any other edifice in all of Darujhistan.

Light was rare from the cracks between those knotted shutters, and when it did show it was dull, desultory. The door never opened.

Among his kin, Chillbais was a giant. Heavy as a badger, with sculpted muscles beneath the prickly hide. His folded wings were very nearly too small to lift him skyward, and each sweep of those leathery fans forced a grunt from the demon's throat.

This time would be worse than most. It had been months since he'd last moved, hidden as he was from prying eyes in the gloom of an overhanging branch from the ash tree in the estate garden at his back. But when he saw that flash of movement before him, that whispering flow of motion, out from the gnarled, black house and across the path, even as earth erupted in its wake to open a succession of hungry pits, even as roots writhed out seeking to ensnare this fugitive, Chillbais knew his vigil was at an end.

The shadow slid out to crouch against the low wall of the Azath House, seemed to watch those roots snaking closer for a long moment, then rose and, flowing like liquid night over the stone wall, was gone.

Grunting, Chillbais spread his creaking wings, shook the creases loose from the sheets of membrane between the rib-like fingers, then leapt forward, out from beneath the branch, catching what air he could, then flapping frenziedly – his grunts growing savage – until he slammed hard into the mulched ground.

Spitting twigs and leaves, the demon scrambled back for the estate wall, hearing how those roots spun round, lashing out for him. Claws digging into mortar, Chillbais scrabbled back on to his original perch. Of course,

there had been no real reason to fear. The roots never reached beyond the Azath's own wall, and a glance back assured him—

Squealing, Chillbais launched back into the air, this time out over the estate garden.

Oh, no one ever liked demons!

Cool air above the overgrown fountain, then, wings thudding hard, heaving upward, up into the night.

A word, yes, for his master. A most extraordinary word. So unexpected, so incendiary, so fraught!

Chillbais thumped his wings as hard as he could, an obese demon in the darkness above the blue, blue city.

*

Zechan Throw and Giddyn the Quick had found the perfect place for the ambush. Twenty paces down a narrow street two recessed doorways faced each other. Four drunks had staggered past a few moments earlier, and none had seen the assassins standing motionless in the inky darkness. And now that they were past and the way was clear . . . a simple step forward and blood would flow.

The two targets approached. Both carried clay jugs and were weaving slightly. They seemed to be arguing, but not in a language Zechan understood. Malazan, likely. A quick glance to the left. The four drunks were just leaving the far end, plunging into a motley crowd of revellers.

Zechan and Giddyn had followed the two out from K'rul's Bar, watching on as they found a wine merchant, haggled over what the woman demanded for the jugs of wine, settled on a price, then set out on their return leg of the journey.

Somewhere along the way they must have pulled the stoppers on the jugs, for now they were loud in their argument, the slightly taller one, who walked pigeon-toed and was blue-skinned – Zechan could just make him

out from where he stood – pausing to lean against a wall as if moments from losing his supper.

He soon righted himself, and it seemed the argument was suddenly over. Straightening, the taller one joined the other and, from the sounds of their boots in the rubbish, set out by his side.

Simply perfect.

Nothing messy, nothing at all messy. Zechan lived for nights like this.

Dester moved quickly, his moccasins noiseless on the cobbles, rushing for the woman striding oblivious ahead of him. Twelve paces, eight, four—

She spun, cloak whirling out.

A blurred sliver of blued steel, flickering a slashing arc. Dester skidded, seeking to pull back from the path of that weapon – a longsword, Beru fend! – and something clipped his throat. He twisted and ducked down to his left, both daggers thrust out to ward her off should she seek to close.

A longsword!

Heat was spilling down his neck, down his chest beneath his deerhide shirt. The alley seemed to waver before his eyes, darkness curling in. Dester Thrin staggered, flailing with his daggers. A boot or mailed fist slammed into the side of his head and there was more splashing on to the cobbles. He could no longer grip the daggers. He heard them skitter on stone.

Blind, stunned, lying on the hard ground. It was cold.

A strange lassitude filled his thoughts, spreading out, rising up, taking him away.

Picker stood over the corpse. The red smear on the tip of her sword glistened, drawing her gaze, and she was reminded, oddly enough, of poppies after a rain. She grunted. The bastard had been quick, almost quick enough to evade her slash. Had he done so, she might have had some work to do. Still, unless the fool was skilled in throwing those puny daggers, she would have cut him down eventually.

Pushing through Gadrobi crowds risked little more than cut-purses. As a people they were singularly gentle. In any case, it made such things as picking up someone trailing her that much easier – when that someone wasn't Gadrobi, of course.

The man dead at her feet was Daru. Might as well have worn a lantern on his hooded head, the way it bobbed above the crowd in her wake.

Even so . . . she frowned down at him. *You wasn't no thug. Not with daggers like those.*

*Hound's Breath.*

Sheathing her sword and pulling her cloak about her once more, ensuring that it well hid the scabbarded weapon which, if discovered by a Watch, would see her in a cell with a damned huge fine to pay, Picker pushed the wrapped stack of flatbread tighter under her left arm, then set out once more.

Blend, she decided, was in a lot of trouble.

Zechan and Giddyn, in perfect unison, launched themselves out from the alcoves, daggers raised then thrusting down.

A yelp from the taller one as Giddyn's blades plunged deep. The Malazan's knees buckled and vomit sprayed from his mouth as he sank down, the jug crashing to a rush of wine.

Zechan's own weapons punched through leather, edges grating along ribs. One for each lung. Tearing the daggers loose, the assassin stepped back to watch the red-haired one fall.

A shortsword plunged into the side of Zechan's neck.

He was dead before he hit the cobbles.

Giddyn, looming over the kneeling Malazan, looked up.

Two hands closed round his head. One clamped tight over his mouth, and all at once his lungs were full of water. He was drowning. The hand

tightened, fingers pinching his nostrils shut. Darkness rose within him, and the world slowly went away.

Antsy snorted as he tugged his weapon free, then added a kick to the assassin's face to punctuate its frozen expression of surprise.

Bluepearl grinned across at him. 'See the way I made the puke spray out? If that ain't genius I don't know what—'

'Shut up,' Antsy snapped. 'These weren't muggers looking for a free drink, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Frowning, Bluepearl looked down at the body before him with the water leaking from its mouth and nose. The Napan ran a hand over his shaved pate. 'Aye. But they was amateurs anyway. Hood, we saw those breath plumes from halfway down the street. Which stopped when those drunks crossed, telling us they wasn't the target. Meaning—'

'We were. Aye, and that's my point.'

'Let's get back,' Bluepearl said, suddenly nervous.

Antsy tugged at his moustache, then nodded. 'Work up that illusion again, Bluepearl. Us ten paces ahead.'

'Easy, Sergeant—'

'I ain't no sergeant no more.'

'Yeah? Then why you still barking orders?'

By the time Picker arrived within sight of the front entrance to K'rul's Bar, her rage was incandescent. She paused, scanned the area. Spotted someone leaning in shadows across from the bar's door. Hood drawn up, hands hidden.

Picker set off towards the figure.

She was noticed with ten paces between them, and she saw the man straighten, saw the growing unease betrayed by a shift of those covered arms, the cloak rippling. A half-dozen celebrants careened between them, and as they passed Picker took the last stride needed to reach the man.

Whatever he had been expecting – perhaps her accosting him with some loud accusation – it was clear that he was unprepared for the savage kick she delivered between his legs. As he was going down she stepped closer and slapped her right hand against the back of his head, adding momentum to the man's collapse. When his forehead cracked against the cobbles there was a sickly crunch. The body began to spasm where it lay.

A passer-by paused, peered down at the twitching body.

'You!' Picker snarled. 'What's your damned problem?'

Surprise, then a shrug. 'Nothing, sweetie. Served 'im right, standin' there like that. Say, would you marry me?'

'Go away.'

As the stranger ambled on, bemoaning his failure at love, Picker looked around, waiting to see if there was someone else bolting from some hidden place nearby. If it had already happened, then she had missed it. More likely, the unseen eyes watching all of this were peering down from a rooftop somewhere.

The man on the ground had stopped twitching.

Spinning round, she headed for the entrance to K'rul's Bar.

'Pick!'

Two strides from the battered door, she turned, and saw Antsy and Bluepearl – lugging jugs of Saltoan wine – hurrying up to join her. Antsy's expression was fierce. Bluepearl lagged half a step behind, eyes on the motionless body on the other side of the street, where a Gadrobi urchin was now busy stealing whatever she could find.

'Get over here,' Picker snapped, 'both of you! Keep your eyes open.'

'Shopping's gettin' murderous,' Antsy said. 'Bluepearl had us illusioned most of the way back, after we sniffed out an ambush—'

With one last glare back out on to the street, Picker took them both by their arms and pulled them unceremoniously towards the door. 'Inside,

idiots.'

*Unbelievable, a night like this, making me so foul of temper I went and turned down the first decent marriage proposal I've had in twenty years.*

Blend was sitting in the place she sat in whenever she smelled trouble. A small table in shadows right beside the door, doing her blending thing, except this time her legs were stretched out, just enough to force a stumble from anyone coming inside.

Stepping through the doorway, Picker gave those black boots a solid kick.

'Ow, my ankle!'

Picker dropped the stack of flatbread on to Blend's lap.

'Oof!'

Antsy and Bluepearl pushed past. The ex-sergeant snorted. 'Now there's our scary minder at the door. "Ow, oof!" she says.'

But Blend had already recovered and was unwrapping the flatbread.

'You know, Blend,' Picker said as she settled at the bar, 'the old Rhivi hags who make those spit on the pan before they slap down the dough. Some ancient spirit blessing—'

'It's not that,' Blend cut in, folding back the flaps of the wrapper. 'The sizzle tells them the pan's hot enough.'

'Ain't it just,' Bluepearl muttered.

Picker scowled, then nodded. 'Aye. Let's all head to our office, all of us – Blend, go find Mallet, too.'

'Bad timing,' Blend observed.

'What?'

'Spindle taking that pilgrimage.'

'Lucky for him.'

Blend slowly rose and said round a mouthful of flatbread, 'Duiker?'

Picker hesitated, then said, 'Ask him. If he wants, aye.'

Blend slowly blinked. 'You kill somebody tonight, Pick?'

No answer was a good enough answer. Picker peered suspiciously at the small crowd in the bar, those too drunk to have reeled out into the street at the twelfth bell, as was the custom. Regulars one and all. *That'll do.* Waving for the others to follow, Picker set out for the stairs.

At the far end of the main room, that damned bard was bleating on with one of the more obscure verses of *Anomandaris*, but nobody was listening.

The three of them saw themselves as the new breed on Darujhistan's Council. Shardan Lim was the thinnest and tallest, with a parched face and washed-out blue eyes. Hook-nosed, a lipless slash of a mouth perpetually turned down as if he could not restrain his contempt for the world. The muscles of his left wrist were twice the size of those of the right, criss-crossed with proudly displayed scars. He met Challice's eyes like a man about to ask her husband if his own turn with her was imminent, and she felt that regard like the cold hand of possession round her throat. A moment later his bleached eyes slid away and there was the flicker of a half-smile as he reached for his goblet where it rested on the mantel.

Standing opposite Shardan Lim, on the other side of the nearly dead fire, with long fingers caressing the ancient ground hammerstones mortared into the fireplace, was Hanut Orr. Plaything to half the noble women in the city, so long as they were married or otherwise divested of maidenhood, he did indeed present that most enticing combination of dangerous charm and dominating arrogance – traits that seduced otherwise intelligent women – and it was well known how he delighted in seeing his lovers crawl on their knees towards him, begging a morsel of his attention.

Challice's husband was sprawled in his favourite chair to Hanut Orr's left, legs stretched out, looking thoughtfully into his goblet, the wine with its hue of blue blood slowly swirling as he tilted his hand in lazy circles.

'Dear wife,' he now said in his usual drawl, 'has the balcony air revived you?'

'Wine?' asked Shardan Lim, brows lifting as if serving her was his life's calling.

Should a husband take umbrage with such barely constrained leering from his so-called friends? Gorlas seemed indifferent.

'No thank you, Councillor Lim. I have just come to wish you all a good night. Gorlas, will you be much longer here?'

He did not look up from his wine, though his mouth moved as if he was tasting his last sip all over again, finding the remnants faintly sour on his palate. 'There is no need to wait for me, wife.'

An involuntary glance over at Shardan revealed both amusement and the clear statement that *he* would not be so dismissive of her.

And, with sudden, dark perverseness, she found herself meeting his eyes and smiling in answer.

If it could be said, without uncertainty, that Gorlas Vidikas did not witness this exchange, Hanut Orr did, although his amusement was of the more savage, contemptuous kind.

Feeling sullied, Challice turned away.

Her handmaid trailed her out and up the broad flight of stairs, the only witness to the stiffness of her back as she made her way to the bedroom.

Once the door was closed she threw off her half-cloak.

'Lay out my jewellery,' she said.

'Mistress?'

She spun to the old woman. 'I wish to see my jewellery!'

Ducking, the woman hurried off to do her bidding.

'The old pieces,' Challice called after her. From the time before all this. When she had been little more than a child, marvelling over the gifts of suitors, all the bribes for her affection still clammy from sweaty hands. Oh, there had been so many possibilities then.

Her eyes narrowed as she stood before her vanity.

Well, perhaps not only then. Did it mean anything? Did it even matter any more? Her husband had what he wanted now. Three duellists, three hard men with hard voices in the Council. One of the three now, yes, all he wanted.

Well, what about what *she* wanted?

*But . . . what is it that I want?*

She didn't know.

'Mistress.'

Challice turned.

Laid out on the vanity's worn surface, the treasure of her maidenhood looked . . . cheap. Gaudy. The very sight of those baubles made her sick in the pit of her stomach. 'Put them in a box,' she said to her servant. 'Tomorrow we sell them.'

He should never have lingered in the garden. His amorous host, the widow Sepharla, had fallen into a drunken slumber on the marble bench, one hand still holding her goblet as, head tilted back and mouth hanging open, loud snores groaned out into the sultry night air. The failed enterprise had amused Murillio, and he had stood for a time, sipping at his own wine and smelling the fragrant scents of the blossoms, until a sound alerted him to someone's quiet arrival.

Turning, he found himself looking upon the widow's daughter.

He should never have done that, either.

Half his age, but that delineation no longer distinguished unseemly from otherwise. She was past her rite of passage by three, perhaps four years, just nearing that age among young women when it was impossible for a man to tell whether she was twenty or thirty. And by that point, all such judgement was born of wilful self-delusion and hardly mattered anyway.

He'd had, perhaps, too much wine. Enough to weaken a certain resolve, the one having to do with recognizing his own maturity, that host of years behind him of which he was constantly reminded by the dwindling number of covetous glances flung his way. True, one might call it experience, settling for those women who knew enough to appreciate such traits. But a man's mind was quick to flit from how things were to how he wanted them to be, or, even worse, to how they used to be. As the saying went, when it came to the truth, every man was a duellist sheathed in the blood of ten thousand cuts.

None of this passed through Murillio's mind in the moment his eyes locked gazes with Delish, the unwed daughter of widow Sepharla. The wine, he would later conclude. The heat and steam of the fête, the sweet blossom scents on the moist, warm air. The fact that she was virtually naked, wearing but a shift of thin silk. Her light brown hair was cut incredibly short in the latest fashion among maidens. Face pale as cream, with full lips and the faintest slope to her nose. Liquid brown eyes big as a waif's, but there was no cracked bowl begging alms in her hands. This urchin's need belonged elsewhere.

Reassured by the snoring from the marble bench – and horrified by his own relief – Murillio bowed low before her. 'Well timed, my dear,' he said, straightening. 'I was considering how best to assist your mother to her bed. Suggestions?'

A shake of that perfectly shaped head. 'She sleeps there most nights. Just like that.'

The voice was young yet neither nasal nor high-pitched as seemed the style among so many maidens these days, and so it failed in reminding him of that vast chasm of years between them.

Oh, in retrospect, so many regrets this night!

'She never thought you'd accept her invitation,' Delish went on, glancing down to where she had kicked off one of her sandals and was now prodding it with a delicate toe. 'Desirable as you are. In demand, I mean, on this night especially.'

Too clever by far, this stroking of his vaguely creped and nearly flaccid ego. 'But dear, why are you here? Your list of suitors must be legion, and among them—'

'Among them, not a single one worth calling a man.'

Did a thousand hormone-soaked hearts break with that dismissive utterance? Did beds lurch in the night, feet kicking clear of sweaty sheets? He could almost believe it.

'And that includes Prelick.'

'Excuse me, who?'

'The drunk, useless fool now passed out in the foyer.

Tripping over his sword all night. It was execrable.'

*Execrable. Yes, now I see.*

'The young are prone to excessive enthusiasm,' Murillio observed. 'I have no doubt poor Prelick has been anticipating this night for weeks, if not months. Naturally, he succumbed to nervous agitation, brought on by proximity to your lovely self. Pity such young men, Delish; they deserve that much at least.'

'I'm not interested in pity, Murillio.'

She should never have said his name in just that way. He should never have listened to her say anything at all.

'Delish, can you stomach advice on this night, from one such as myself?'

Her expression was one of barely maintained forbearance, but she nodded.

'Seek out the quiet ones. Not the ones who preen, or display undue arrogance. The quiet ones, Delish, prone to watchfulness.'

'You describe no one I know.'

'Oh, they are there. It just takes a second glance to notice them.'

She had both sandals off now, and she dismissed his words with a wave of one pale hand that somehow brought her a step closer. Looking up as if suddenly shy, yet holding his gaze too long for there to be any real temerity. 'Not quiet ones. Not ones to pity. No . . . children! Not tonight, Murillio. Not under this moon.'

And he found her in his arms, a soft body all too eager with naught but filmy silk covering it and she seemed to be sliding all over him, a sylph, and he thought: *Under this moon?* Her last gesture at the poetic, alas, since she was already tearing at his clothes, her mouth with those full lips wet and parted and a tongue flickering as she bit at his own lips. And here he was with one hand on one of her breasts, his other hand slipping round to her behind, hitching her up as she spread her legs and climbed to anchor herself on his hips, and he heard his belt buckle clack on the pavestone between his boots.

She was not a large woman. Not at all heavy, but surprisingly athletic, and she rode him with such violence that he felt his lower spine creak with every frenzied plunge. He sank into his usual detachment at this point, the kind that assured impressive endurance, and took a moment to confirm that the snoring continued behind him. All at once that sonorous sound struck him with a sense of prophetic dissolution, surrender to the years of struggle that was life's own chorus – *and so we shall all end our days* – a momentary pang that, had he permitted it to linger, would have unmanned him utterly. Delish, meanwhile, was wearing herself out, her gasps harsher, quicker, as shudders rose through her, and so he surrendered – not a moment too soon – to sensation. And joined her in one final, helpless gasp.

She held on to him and he could feel her pounding heart as he slowly lowered her back on to her feet, gently pulling away.

It was, all things considered, the worst moment to witness the blur of an iron blade flashing before his eyes. Burning agony as the sword thrust into his chest, the point pushing entirely through, making the drunken fool wielding it stumble forward, almost into the arms of Murillio.

Who was then falling back, the sword sliding out with a reluctant sob.

Delish screamed, and the look on Prelick's face was triumphant.

'Hah! The rapist dies!'

More footsteps, then, rushing out from the house. Voices clamouring. Bemused, Murillio picked himself back up, tugging at his pantaloons, cinching tight his belt. His lime green silk shirt was turning purple in blotches. There was blood on his chin, frothing up in soft, rattling coughs. Hands pulled at him and he pushed them all away, staggering for the gate.

Regrets, yes, jostling with the oblivious crowds on the street. Moments of lucidity, unknown periods of dim, red haze, standing with one hand on a stone wall, spitting down streams of blood. Oh, plenty of regrets.

Fortunately, he did not think they would hound him for much longer.

*

Was it habit or some peculiar twist in family traits that gave Scorch his expression of perpetual surprise? There was no telling, since every word the man uttered was delivered in tones of bewildered disbelief, as if Scorch could never be sure of what his senses told him of the outside world, and was even less certain of whatever thoughts clamoured in his head. He stared now at Leff, eyes wide and mouth gaping in between nervous licks of his lips, while Leff in turn squinted at Scorch as if chronically suspicious of his friend's apparent idiocy.

'All them ain't gonna wait for ever, Leff! We should never have signed on to this. I say we hitch on the next trader shippin' out. Down to Dhavran, maybe all the way t'the coast! Ain't you got a cousin in Mengal?'

Leff slowly blinked. 'Aye, Scorch. They let 'im furnish his cell himself, he's in there so much. You want us go up there and take on his mess too? Besides, then *we'd* end up on the list.'

Astonishment and dread filled Scorch's face. He looked away, whispered, 'It's the list that's done us in. The list . . .'

'We knew it wouldn't be easy,' Leff said in a possible attempt at mollification. 'Things like that never are.'

'But we ain't gotten nowhere!'

'It's only been a week, Scorch.'

The time had come for a modest clearing of the throat, a dab of the silk handkerchief on oily brow, a musing tug on the mouse-tail beard. 'Gentlemen!' Ah, now he had their attention. 'Witness the Skirmishers on the field and yon Mercenary's Coin, glinting ever as golden lures are wont to glint . . . everywhere. But here especially, and the knuckles still reside in sweaty hand of surprised Scorch, too long clutched and uncast. Interminable has this game grown, with Kruppe patient as he perches on very edge of glorious victory!'

Leff scowled. 'You ain't winning nothing, Kruppe! You're losing, and bad, Coin or no Coin! And what use is it anyway – I don't see no mercenary anywhere on the field, so who's it paying for? Nobody!'

Smiling, Kruppe leaned back.

The crowd was noisome this night at the Phoenix Inn, as more and more drunks stumbled back in after their pleasing foray in the dusty, grimy streets. Kruppe, of course, felt magnanimous towards them all, as suited his naturally magnanimous nature.

Scorch cast the knuckles, then stared at the half-dozen etched bones as if they spelled out his doom.

And so they had. Kruppe leaned forward once again. 'Ho, the Straight Road reveals itself, and see how these six Mercenaries march on to the field! Slaying left and right! One cast of the knuckles, and the universe changes! Behold this grim lesson, dear companions of Kruppe. When the Coin is revealed, how long before a hand reaches for it?'

Virtually no cast in the Riposte Round could save the two hapless Kings and their equally hapless players, Scorch and Leff. Snarling, Leff swept an arm through the field, scattering pieces everywhere. As he did so he palmed the Coin and would have slipped it into his waistband if not for a wag of Kruppe's head and the pudgy hand reaching out palm up.

Cursing under his breath, Leff dropped the Coin into that hand.

'To the spoiler, the victory,' Kruppe said, smiling. 'Alas for poor Scorch and Leff, this single coin is but a fraction of riches now belonging to triumphant Kruppe. Two councils each, yes?'

'That's a week's wages for a week that ain't come yet,' Leff said. 'We'll have to owe you, friend.'

'Egregious precedent! Kruppe, however, understands how such reversals can catch one unawares, which makes perfect sense, since they are reversals. Accordingly, given the necessity for a week's noble labour, Kruppe is happy to extend deadline for said payment to one week from today.'

Groaning, Scorch sat back. 'The list, Leff. We're back to that damned list.'

'Many are the defaulters,' Kruppe said, sighing. 'And eager those demanding recompense, so much so that they assemble a dread list, and upon diminishment of names therein remit handsomely to those who would enforce collection, yes?'

The two men stared. Scorch's expression suggested that he had just taken a sharp blow to the head and was yet to find his wits. Leff simply scowled. 'Aye, that list, Kruppe. We took the job on since we didn't have nothing else to do since Boc's sudden . . . demise. And now it looks like our names might end up on it!'

'Nonsense! Or, rather, Kruppe elaborates, not if such a threat looms as a result of some future defaultment on monies owed Kruppe. Lists of that nature are indeed pernicious and probably counterproductive and Kruppe finds their very existence reprehensible. Wise advice is to relax somewhat on that matter. Unless, of course, one finds the deadline fast approaching with naught but lint in one's pouch. Further advice, achieve a victory on the list, receive due reward, repair immediately to Kruppe and clear the modest debt. The alternative, alas, is that we proceed with an entirely different solution.'

Leff licked his lips. 'What solution would that be?'

'Why, Kruppe's modest assistance regarding said list, of course. For a minuscule percentage.'

'For a cut you'd help us hunt down them that's on the list?'

'To do so would be in Kruppe's best interests, given this debt between him and you two.'

'What's the percentage?'

'Why, thirty-three, of course.'

'And you call that modest?'

'No, I called it minuscule. Dearest partners, have you found *any* of the people on that list?'

Miserable silence answered him, although Scorch was still looking rather confused.

'There is,' Kruppe said with an expansive swell of his chest that threatened the two stalwart buttons of his vest, 'no one in Darujhistan that Kruppe cannot find.' He settled back, and the brave buttons gleamed with victory.

Shouting, a commotion at the door, then Meese crying out Kruppe's name.

Startled, Kruppe rose, but could not see over the heads of all these peculiarly tall patrons – how annoying – and so he edged round his table and pushed his grunting, gasping way through to the bar, where Irilta was half dragging a blood-drenched Murillio on to the counter, knocking aside tankards and goblets.

*Oh my.* Kruppe met Meese's eyes, noted the fear and alarm. 'Meese, go to Coll at once.'

Pale, she nodded.

The crowd parted before her. Because, as the Gadrobi are wont to say, even a drunk knows a fool, and, drunk or not, no one was fool enough to get in that woman's way.

Picker's sword lay on the table, its tip smeared in drying blood. Antsy had added his shortsword, its blade far messier. Together, mute testaments to this impromptu meeting's agenda.

Bluepearl sat at one end of the long table, nursing his headache with a tankard of ale; Blend was by the door, arms folded as she leaned against the frame. Mallet sat in a chair to Bluepearl's left, with all his nerves pushed into one jumpy leg, the thigh and knee jittering, while his face remained closed as he refused to meet anyone's eyes. Near the ratty tapestry dating back to the time when this place was still a temple stood Duiker, once Imperial Historian, now a broken old man.

In fact, Picker was mildly surprised that he'd accepted the invitation to join them. Perhaps some remnant of curiosity flickered still in the ashes of Duiker's soul, although he seemed more interested in the faded scene on the tapestry with its aerial flotilla of dragons approaching a temple much like the one they were in.

Nobody seemed ready to start talking. Typical. The task always fell at her feet, like some wounded dove. 'Assassins' Guild's taken on a contract,' she said, deliberately harsh. 'Target? At the very least, me, Antsy and Bluepearl. More likely, all us partners.' She paused, waiting to hear some objection. Nothing. 'Antsy, we turn down any offers on this place?'

'Picker,' the Falari said in an identical tone, 'ain't nobody's ever made an offer on this place.'

'Fine,' she replied. 'So, anyone catch a rumour that the old K'rul cult has been resurrected? Some High Priest somewhere in the city wanting the old temple back?'

Bluepearl snorted.

'What's that supposed to tell us?' Picker demanded, glaring at him.

'Nothing,' the Napan mage muttered. 'I ain't heard nothing like that, Pick. Now if Ganoes Paran ever comes back from wherever he's gone, we could get ourselves a sure answer. Still, I don't think there's any cult trying to move back in.'

'How do you know?' Antsy demanded. 'Can you smell 'em or something?'

'Oh, not now,' Bluepearl complained. 'No more questions tonight. That Mockra's chewed everything in my skull to pulp. I hate Mockra.'

'It's the ghosts,' said Mallet in that odd, gentle voice of his. He glanced across at Bluepearl. 'Right? They're not whispering anything they haven't been whispering since we moved in. Just the usual moans and begging for blood.' His gaze shifted to the swords on the table before him. 'Blood spilled here, that is. Stuff brought in from outside doesn't count. Luckily.'

Blend said, 'So try not cutting yourself shaving, Antsy.'

'There's been the odd scrap downstairs,' Picker said, frowning at Mallet. 'Are you saying that's been feeding the damned ghosts?'

The healer shrugged. 'Never enough to make a difference.'

'We need us a necromancer,' Bluepearl announced.

'We're getting off track,' Picker said. 'It's the damned contract we got to worry about. We need to find out who's behind it. We find out who, we throw a cusser through his bedroom window and that's that. So,' she continued, looking at the others, 'we need to come up with a plan of attack.

Information to start. Let's hear some ideas on that.'

More silence.

Blend stepped away from the door. 'Someone's coming,' she said.

Now they could all hear the boots thumping up the stairs, hissed protestations in their wake.

Antsy collected his sword and Bluepearl slowly rose and Picker could smell the sudden awakening of sorcery. She held up a hand. 'Wait, for Hood's sake.'

The door was flung open.

In strode a large, well-dressed man, out of breath, his light blue eyes scanning faces until they alighted on Mallet, who rose.

'Councillor Coll. What is wrong?'

'I need your help,' the Daru noble said, and Picker could hear the distress in the man's voice. 'High Denul. I need you, now.'

Before Mallet could reply, Picker stepped forward. 'Councillor Coll, did you come here alone?'

The man frowned. Then a vague gesture behind him. 'A modest escort. Two guards.' Only then did he note the sword on the table. 'What is happening here?'

'Picker,' said Mallet, 'I'll take Bluepearl.'

'I don't like—'

But the healer cut her off. 'We need information, don't we? Coll can help us. Besides, they wouldn't have set more than one clan on us to start and you took care of that one.

The Guild needs to recover, reassess – we've got a day at least.'

Picker looked across at the councillor, who, if he didn't quite grasp what was going on, now had enough for a fair guess. Sighing, she said to him, 'Seems there's someone wants us dead. You might not want to get involved with us right now—'

But he shook his head, fixed his gaze once more on Mallet. 'Healer, please.'

Mallet nodded to a scowling Bluepearl. 'Lead on, Councillor. We're with ya.'

*'. . . came upon Osserick, stalwart ally, broken and with blood on his face, struck into unconsciousness. And Anomander fell to his knees and called upon the Thousand Gods who looked down upon Osserick and saw the blood on his face. With mercy they struck him awakened and so he stood.*

*'And so stood Anomander and they faced one another, Light upon Dark, Dark upon Light.*

*'Now there was rage in Anomander. "Where is Draconnus?" he demanded of his stalwart ally. For when Anomander had departed, the evil tyrant Draconnus, Slayer of Eleint, had been by Anomander's own hand struck into unconsciousness and there was blood on his face. Osserick, who had taken the charge of guarding Draconnus, fell to his knees and called upon the Thousand Gods, seeking their mercy before Anomander's fury. "I was bested!" cried Osserick in answer. "Caught by Sister Spite unawares! Oh, the Thousand Gods were turned away, and so was I struck into unconsciousness and see there is blood on my face!"*

*'"One day," vowed Anomander, and he was then the darkness of a terrible storm, and Osserick quailed like a sun behind a cloud, "this alliance of ours shall end. Our enmity shall be renewed, O Son of Light, Child of Light. We shall contest every span of ground, every reach of sky, every spring of sweet water. We shall battle a thousand times and there shall be no mercy between us. I shall send misery upon your kin, your daughters. I shall blight their minds with Unknowing Dark. I shall scatter them confused on realms unknown and there shall be no mercy in their hearts, for between them and the Thousand Gods there shall ever be a cloud of darkness."*

*'Such was Anomander's fury, and though he stood alone, Dark upon Light, there was sweetness lingering in the palm of one hand, from the deceiving touch of Lady Envy. Light upon Dark, Dark upon Light, two men, wielded as weapons by two sisters, children of Draconnus. Who stood unseen by any and were pleased by what they saw and all that they heard.*

*'It was decided then that Anomander would set out once more, to hunt down the evil tyrant. To destroy him and his cursed sword which is an abomination in the eyes of the Thousand Gods and all who kneel to them. Osserick, it was decided, would set out to hunt Spite and exact righteous vengeance.*

*'Of the vow spoken by Anomander, Osserick knew the rage from which it was spawned, and in silence he made vow to answer it in his own time. To spar, to duel, to contest every span of ground, every reach of sky, and every spring of sweet water. But such matters must needs lie upon calm earth, a seed awaiting life.*

*'This issue with Draconnus remained before them, after all, and now Spite as well. Did not the Children of Tiam demand punishment? There was blood on the faces of too many Eleint, and so Anomander and so Osserick had taken on themselves this fated hunt.*

*'Could the Eleint have known all that would come of this, they would have withdrawn their storm-breath, from both Anomander and Osserick. But these fates were not to be known then, and this is why the Thousand Gods wept . . .'*

Rubbing his eyes, High Alchemist Baruk leaned back. The original version of this, he suspected, was not the mannered shambles he had just read through. Those quaint but overused phrases belonged to an interim age when the style among historians sought to resurrect some oral legacy in an effort to reinforce the veracity of eyewitnesses to the events described. The result had given him a headache.

He had never heard of the Thousand Gods, and this pantheon could not be found in any other compendium but Dillat's *Dark and Light*. Baruk suspected Dillat had simply made them up, which prompted the question: how much else did she invent?

Leaning forward once more, he adjusted the lantern's wick, then leafed through the brittle sheets until another section caught his interest.

*'In this day there was war among the dragons. The First Born had all but one bowed necks to K'rul's bargain. Their children, bereft of all that they would have inherited, burst skyward from the towers in great flurry yet even these were not united beyond rejecting the First Born. Factions arose and red rain descended upon all the Realms. Jaws fastened upon necks. Talons opened bellies. The breath of chaos melted flesh from bones.*

*'Anomander, Osserick and others had already tasted the blood of Tiam, and now there came more with raging thirst and many a demonic abomination was spawned of this crimson nectar. So long as the Gates of Starvald Demelain remained open, unguarded and held by none, the war would not end, and so the red rain descended upon all the Realms.*

*'Kurald Liosan was the first Realm to seal the portal between itself and Starvald Demelain, and the tale that follows recounts the slaughter committed by Osserick in cleansing his world of all the pretenders and rivals, the Soletaken and feral purebloods, even unto driving the very first D'ivers from his land.*

*'This begins at the time when Osserick fought Anomander for the sixteenth time and both had blood on their faces before Kilmandaros, she who speaks with her fists, took upon herself the task of driving them apart . . .'*

Baruk looked up, then twisted in his chair to regard his guest, who was busy preening herself on his map-table. 'Crone, the inconsistencies in this text are infuriating.'

The Great Raven cocked her head, beak gaping for a moment in laughter, then said, 'So what? Show me a written history that makes sense, and I will show you true fiction. If that is all you want, then look elsewhere! My master concluded that Dillat's nonsense would make a fine gift for your collection. If you are truly displeased, there are plenty of other idiocies in his library, those that he bothered to extract from Moon's Spawn, that is. He left whole rooms crammed with the rubbish, you know.'

Baruk blinked slowly, struggling to keep his horror from his voice as he said, 'No, I did not know that.'

Undeceived, Crone cackled. Then she said, 'My master was most amused at the notion of falling to his knees and crying out to the Hundred Gods—'

'Thousand. The Thousand Gods.'

'Whatever.' A duck of the head and the wings half spread. 'Or even making a vow to battle Osserc. Their alliance fell apart because of a growing mutual dislike. The disaster with Draconus probably delivered the death-blow. Imagine, falling for a woman's wiles – and a daughter of Draconus at that! Was Osserc not even remotely suspicious of her motives? Hah! The males among every species in existence are so . . . predictable!'

Baruk smiled. 'If I recall Fisher's *Anomandaris*, Lady Envy managed pretty much the same with your master, Crone.'

'Nothing he was unaware of at the time,' the Great Raven said with a strange clucking sound to punctuate the statement. 'My master has always understood the necessity of certain sacrifices.' She fluffed up her onyx feathers. 'Consider the outcome, after all!'

Baruk grimaced.

'I'm hungry!' Crone announced.

'I didn't finish my supper,' Baruk said. 'On that plate—'

'I know, I know! What do you think made me hungry in the first place? Sit in wonder at my patience, High Alchemist! Even as you read on interminably!'

'Eat now and quickly, old friend,' Baruk said, 'lest you die of malnutrition.'

'You were never such a careless host before,' the Great Raven observed, hopping over to the plate and spearing a sliver of meat. 'You are troubled, High Alchemist.'

'By many things, yes. The Rhivi claim that the White Face Barghast have disappeared. Utterly.'

'Indeed,' Crone replied. 'Almost immediately after the fall of Coral and the Tiste Andii investiture.'

'Crone, you are a Great Raven. Your children ride the winds and see all.'

'Perhaps.'

'Why then will you not tell me where they went?'

'Well, the Grey Swords as you know marched south, down to Elingarth,' Crone said, circling the plate in short hops.

'And there they purchased ships.' A pause and cock of the head. 'Could they see the wake before them? Did they know to follow? Or is there

perhaps a great hole in the world's ocean, drawing every ship into its deadly maw?'

'The White Face took to the seas? Extraordinary. And the Grey Swords *followed* them.'

'None of this is relevant, High Alchemist.'

'Relevant to what?'

'Your unease, of course. You fling queries at your poor bedraggled guest in order to distract yourself.'

It had been months since Crone's previous visit, and Baruk had come to believe, with some regret, that his cordial relations with the Son of Darkness were drawing to a close, not out of any dispute, simply the chronic ennui of the Tiste Andii. It was said the permanent gloom that was Black Coral well suited the city's denizens, both Andii and human.

'Crone, please extend to your master my sincerest thanks for this gift. It was most unexpected and generous. But I would ask him, if it is not too forward of me, if he is reconsidering the Council's official request to open diplomatic relations between our two cities. Delegates but await your master's invitation, and a suitable site has been set aside for the construction of an embassy – not far from here, in fact.'

'The estate crushed by a Soletaken demon's inglorious descent,' Crone said, pausing to laugh before spearing another chunk of food. 'Aagh, this is vegetable! Disgusting!'

'Indeed, Crone, the very same estate. As I said, not far from here.'

'Master is considering said request, and will continue considering it, I suspect.'

'For how much longer?'

'I have no idea.'

'Does he have concerns?'

The Great Raven, leaning over the plate, tilted her head and regarded Baruk for a long moment.

Baruk felt vaguely sickened and he looked away. 'So, I have reason to be . . . troubled.'

'Master asks: when will it begin?'

The High Alchemist eyed the stack of loosely bound parchment that was Anomander's gift, and nodded. But he did not answer.

'Master asks: do you wish for assistance?'

Baruk winced.

'Master asks,' Crone went on, relentless, 'would said assistance better serve you if it was covert, rather than official?'

*Gods below.*

'Master asks: should sweet Crone stay the night as Baruk's guest, awaiting answers to these queries?'

Clattering at the window. Baruk swiftly rose and approached it.

'A demon!' cried Crone, half spreading her enormous wings.

'One of mine,' said Baruk, unlatching the iron frame and then stepping back as Chillbais clambered awkwardly into view, grunting as he squeezed through. 'Master Baruk!' he squealed. 'Out! Out! Out!'

Baruk had felt ill a moment earlier. Now he was suddenly chilled in his very bones. He slowly shut the window, then faced the Great Raven. 'Crone, it has begun.'

The demon saw her and bared needle fangs as he hissed, 'Grotesque monstrosity!'

Crone made stabbing motions with her beak. 'Bloated toad!'

'Be quiet, both of you!' Baruk snapped. 'Crone, you will indeed stay the night as my guest. Chillbais, find somewhere to be. I have more work for you and I will collect you when it's time.'

Flickering a forked tongue out at Crone, the squat demon waddled towards the fireplace. It clambered on to the glowing coals, then disappeared up the chimney. Black clouds of soot rained down, billowing out from the hearth.

Crone coughed. 'Ill-mannered servants you have, High Alchemist.'

But Baruk was not listening. *Out.*

*Out!*

That lone word rang through his mind, loud as a temple bell, drowning out everything else, although he caught a fast-fading echo . . .

*'. . . stalwart ally, broken and with blood on his face . . .'*

# CHAPTER TWO

Anomander would tell no lie, nor live one,
and would that deafness could
bless him in the days and nights
beyond the black rains of Black Coral.
Alas, this was not to be.
. . .
And so we choose to hear nothing
Of the dreaded creak, the slip and snap
Of wooden wheels, the shudder on stone
And the chiding rattle of chains, as if
Upon some other world is where darkness
Beats out from a cursedly ethereal forge
And no sun rises above horizon's rippled
Cant – some other world not ours indeed –
Yes bless us so, Anomander, with this
Sanctimony, this lie and soft comfort,
And the slaves are not us, this weight
But an illusion, these shackles could break
With a thought, and all these cries and
Moans are less than the murmurs
Of a quiescent heart – it's all but a tale,
My friends, this tall denier of worship
And the sword he carries holds nothing,
No memory at all, and if there be a place
In the cosy scheme for lost souls
Pulling onward an uprooted temple
It but resides in an imagination flawed
And unaligned with sober intricacy –
Nothing is as messy as that messy world
And that comfort leaves us abiding

Deaf and blind and senseless in peace
Within our imagined place, this precious order . . .

*Soliloquy*
*Anomandaris, Book IV*
Fisher kel Tath

Dragon tower stood like a torch above Black Coral. The spire, rising from the northwest corner of the New Andiian Palace, was solid black basalt, dressed in fractured, faceted obsidian that glistened in the eternal gloom enshrouding the city. Atop its flat roof crouched a crimson-scaled dragon, wings folded, its wedge head hanging over one side so that it seemed to stare down on the crazed shadowy patchwork of buildings, alleys and streets far below.

There were citizens still in Black Coral – among the humans – who believed that the ferocious sentinel was the stone creation of some master artisan among the ruling Tiste Andii, and this notion left Endest Silann sourly amused. True, he understood how wilful such ignorance could be. The thought of a real, live dragon casting its baleful regard down on the city and its multitude of scurrying lives was to most truly terrifying, and indeed, had they been close enough to see the gleaming hunger in Silanah's multifaceted eyes, they would have long fled Black Coral in blind panic.

For the Eleint to remain so, virtually motionless, day and night, weeks into months and now very nearly an entire year, was not unusual. And Endest Silann knew this better than most.

The Tiste Andii, once a formidable, if aged, sorceror in Moon's Spawn, now a barely competent castellan to the New Andiian Palace, slowly walked Sword Street as it bent south of the treeless park known as Grey Hill. He had left the fiercely lit district of Fish, where the Outwater Market so crowded every avenue and lane that those who brought two-wheeled carts in which to load purchases were forced to leave them in a square just north of Grey Hill. The endless streams of porters for hire – who gathered every dawn near the Cart Square – always added to the chaos between the stalls, pushing through with wrapped bundles towards the carts and slipping, dodging and sliding like eels back into the press. Although the Outwater Market acquired its name because the preponderance of fish sold there came from the seas beyond Night – the perpetual darkness cloaking the city and the surrounding area for almost a third of a league – there could also be found the pale, gem-eyed creatures of Coral Bay's Nightwater.

Endest Silann had arranged the next week's order of cadaver eels from a new supplier, since the last one's trawler had been pulled down by something too big for its net, with the loss of all hands. Nightwater was not simply an unlit span of sea in the bay, unfortunately. It was Kurald Galain, a true manifestation of the warren, quite possibly depthless, and on occasion untoward beasts loomed into the waters of Coral Bay. Something was down there now, forcing the fishers to use hooks and lines rather than nets, a method possible only because the eels foamed just beneath the surface in the tens of thousands, driven there by terror. Most of the eels pulled aboard were snags.

South of Grey Hill, the street lanterns grew scarcer as Endest Silann made his way into the Andiian district. Typically, there were few Tiste Andii on the streets. Nowhere could be seen figures seated on tenement steps, or in stalls leaning on countertops to call out their wares or simply watch passers-by. Instead, the rare figures crossing Endest's path were one and all on their way somewhere, probably the home of some friend or relation, there to participate in the few remaining rituals of society. Or returning home from such ordeals, as tenuous as smoke from a dying fire.

No fellow Tiste Andii met Endest Silann's eyes as they slipped ghostly past. This, of course, was more than the usual indifference, but he had grown used to it. An old man must needs have a thick skin, and was he not the oldest by far? Excepting Anomander Dragnipurake.

Yet Endest could recall his youth, a vision of himself vaguely blurred by time, setting foot upon this world on a wild night with storms ravaging the sky. *Oh, the storms of that night, the cold water on the face . . . that moment, I see it still.*

They stood facing a new world. His lord's rage ebbing, but slowly, trickling down like the rain. Blood leaked from a sword wound in Anomander's left shoulder. And there had been a look in his eyes . . .

Endest sighed as he worked his way up the street's slope, but it was an uneven, harsh sigh. Off to his left was the heaped rubble of the old palace. A few jagged walls rose here and there, and crews had carved paths into the mass of wreckage, salvaging stone and the occasional timber that had not

burned. The deafening collapse of that edifice still shivered in Endest's bones, and he slowed in his climb, one hand reaching out to lean against a wall. The pressure was returning, making his jaw creak as he clenched his teeth, and pain shot through his skull.

*Not again, please.*

No, this would not do. That time was done, over with. He had survived. He had done as his lord had commanded and he had not failed. No, this would not do at all.

Endest Silann stood, sweat now on his face, with his eyes squeezed shut.

No one ever met his gaze, and this was why. This . . . weakness.

Anomander Dragnipurake had led his score of surviving followers on to the strand of a new world. Behind the flaring rage in his eyes there had been triumph.

This, Endest Silann told himself, was worth remembering. Was worth holding on to.

*We assume the burden as we must. We win through. And life goes on.*

A more recent memory, heaving into his mind. The unbearable pressure of the deep, the water pushing in on all sides. *'You are my last High Mage, Endest Silann. Can you do this for me?'*

The sea, my lord? *Beneath the sea?*

*'Can you do this, old friend?'*

My lord, I shall try.

But the sea had wanted Moon's Spawn, oh, yes, wanted it with savage, relentless hunger. It had railed against the stone, it had besieged the sky keep with its crushing embrace, and in the end there was no throwing back its dark swirling legions.

Oh, Endest Silann had kept them alive for just long enough, but the walls were collapsing even as his lord had summoned the sky keep's last reserves of power, to raise it up from the depths, raise it up, yes, back into the sky.

*So heavy, the weight, so vast—*

Injured beyond recovery, Moon's Spawn was already dead, as dead as Endest Silann's own power. *We both drowned that day. We both died.*

Raging falls of black water thundering down, a rain of tears from stone, oh, how Moon's Spawn wept. Cracks widening, the internal thunder of beauty's collapse . . .

*I should have gone with Moon's Spawn when at last he sent it drifting away, yes, I should have. Squatting among the interred dead. My lord honours me for my sacrifice, but his every word is like ashes drifting down on my face. Abyss below, I felt the sundering of every room! The fissures bursting through were sword slashes in my soul, and how we bled, how we groaned, how we fell inward with our mortal wounds!*

The pressure would not relent. It was within him now.

The sea sought vengeance, and now could assail him no matter where he stood. Hubris had delivered a curse, searing a brand on his soul. A brand that had grown septic. He was too broken to fight it off any more.

*I am Moon's Spawn, now. Crushed in the deep, unable to reach the surface. I descend, and the pressure builds. How it builds!*

No, this would not do. Breath hissing, he pushed himself from the wall, staggered onward. He was a High Mage no longer. He was nothing. A mere castellan, fretting over kitchen supplies and foodstuffs, watch schedules and cords of wood for the hearths. Wax for the yellow-eyed candlemakers. Squid ink for the stained scribes . . .

Now, when he stood before his lord, he spoke of paltry things, and this was his legacy, all that remained.

*Yet did I not stand with him on that strand? Am I not the last one left to share with my lord that memory?*

The pressure slowly eased. And once again, he had survived the embrace. And the next time? There was no telling, but he did not believe he could last much longer.

The pain clutching his chest, the thunder in his skull.

*We have found a new supply of cadaver eels. That is what I will tell him. And he will smile and nod, and perhaps settle one hand on my shoulder. A gentle, cautious squeeze, light enough to ensure that nothing breaks. He will speak his gratitude.*

*For the eels.*

It was a measure of his courage and fortitude that the man had never once denied that he had been a Seerdomin of the Pannion Domin; that, indeed, he had served the mad tyrant in the very keep now reduced to rubble barely a stone's throw behind the Scour Tavern. That he held on to the title was not evidence of some misplaced sense of manic loyalty. The man with the expressive eyes understood irony, and if on occasion some fellow human in the city took umbrage upon hearing him identify himself thus, well, the Seerdomin could take care of himself and that was one legacy that was no cause for shame.

This much and little more was what Spinnock Durav knew of the man, beyond his impressive talent in the game they now played: an ancient game of the Tiste Andii, known as Kef Tanar, that had spread throughout the population of Black Coral and indeed, so he had heard, to cities far beyond – even Darujhistan itself.

As many kings or queens as there were players. A field of battle that expanded with each round and was never twice the same. Soldiers and mercenaries and mages, assassins, spies. Spinnock Durav knew that the original inspiration for Kef Tanar could be found in the succession wars among the First Children of Mother Dark, and indeed one of the king figures bore a slash of silver paint on its mane, whilst another was of bleached bonewood. There was a queen of white fire, opal-crowned; and others Spinnock could, if he bothered, have named, assuming anyone was remotely interested, which he suspected they were not.

Most held that the white mane was a recent affectation, like some mocking salute to Black Coral's remote ruler. The tiles of the field themselves were all flavoured in aspects of Dark, Light and Shadow. The

Grand City and Keep tiles were seen as corresponding to Black Coral, although Spinnock Durav knew that the field's ever-expanding Grand City (there were over fifty tiles for the City alone and a player could make more, if desired) was in fact Kharkanas, the First City of Dark.

But no matter. It was the game that counted.

The lone Tiste Andii in all of the Scour, Spinnock Durav sat with four other players, with a crowd now gathered round to watch this titanic battle which had gone on for five bells. Smoke hung in wreaths just overhead, obscuring the low rafters of the tavern's main room, blunting the light of the torches and candles. Rough pillars here and there held up the ceiling, constructed from fragments of the old palace and Moon's Spawn itself, all inexpertly fitted together, some leaning ominously and displaying cracks in the mortar. Spilled ale puddled the uneven flagstones of the floor, where hard-backed salamanders slithered about, drunkenly attempting to mate with people's feet and needing to be kicked off again and again.

The Seerdomin sat across the table from Spinnock. Two of the other players had succumbed to vassal roles, both now subject to Seerdomin's opal-crowned queen. The third player's forces had been backed into one corner of the field, and he was contemplating throwing in his lot with either Seerdomin or Spinnock Durav.

If the former, then Spinnock was in trouble, although by no means finished. He was, after all, a veteran player whose experience spanned nearly twenty thousand years.

Spinnock was large for a Tiste Andii, wide-shouldered and strangely bearish. There was a faint reddish tinge to his long, unbound hair. His eyes were set wide apart on a broad, somewhat flat face, the cheekbones prominent and flaring. The slash that was his mouth was fixed in a grin, an expression that rarely wavered.

'Seerdomin,' he now said, whilst the cornered player prevaricated, besieged by advice from friends crowded behind his chair, 'you have a singular talent for Kef Tanar.'

The man simply smiled.

In the previous round a cast of the knuckles had delivered a mercenary's coin into the Seerdomin's royal vaults. Spinnock was expecting a flanking foray with the four remaining mercenary figures, either to bring pressure on the third king if he elected to remain independent or threw in his lot with Spinnock, or to drive them deep into Spinnock's own territory. However, with but a handful of field tiles remaining and the Gate not yet selected, Seerdomin would be wiser to hold back.

Breaths were held as the third player reached into the pouch to collect a field tile. He drew out his hand closed in a fist, then met Spinnock's eyes.

Nerves and avarice. 'Three coins, Tiste, and I'm your vassal.'

Spinnock's grin hardened, and he shook his head. 'I don't buy vassals, Garsten.'

'Then you will lose.'

'I doubt Seerdomin will buy your allegiance either.'

'Come to me now,' Seerdomin said to the man, 'and do so on your hands and knees.'

Garsten's eyes flicked back and forth, gauging which viper was likely to carry the least painful bite. After a moment he snarled under his breath and revealed the tile.

'Gate!'

'Delighted to find you sitting on my right,' Spinnock said.

'I retreat through!'

Cowardly, but predictable. This was the only path left to Garsten that allowed him to hold on to the coins in his vault. Spinnock and Seerdomin watched as Garsten marched his pieces from the field.

And then it was Spinnock's turn. With the Gate in play he could summon the five dragons he had amassed. They sailed high over Seerdomin's elaborate ground defences, weathering them with but the loss of one from

the frantic sorcery of the two High Mages atop the towers of Seerdomin's High Keep.

The assault struck down two-thirds of Seerdomin's Inner Court, virtually isolating his queen.

With the ground defences in sudden disarray on the collapse of command, Spinnock advanced a spearhead of his own mercenaries as well as his regiment of Elite Cavalry, neatly bisecting the enemy forces. Both vassals subsequently broke in uprising, each remaining on the field long enough to further savage Seerdomin's beleaguered forces before retreating through the Gate. By the time the game's round reached him, Seerdomin had no choice but to reach out one hand and topple his queen.

Voices rose on all sides, as wagers were settled.

Spinnock Durav leaned forward to collect his winnings. 'Resto! A pitcher of ale for the table here!'

'You are ever generous with my money,' Seerdomin said in sour amusement.

'The secret of generosity, friend.'

'I appreciate the salve.'

'I know.'

As was customary, the other three players, having retreated, could not partake of any gesture of celebration by the game's victor. Accordingly, Spinnock and Seerdomin were free to share the pitcher of ale between them, and this seemed a most satisfying conclusion to such a skilfully waged campaign. The crowd had moved off, fragmenting on all sides, and the servers were suddenly busy once more.

'The problem with us night-owls . . .' said Seerdomin, hunching down over his flagon. When it seemed he would say no more he added, 'Not once does a glance to yon smudged pane over there reveal the poppy-kiss of dawn.'

'Dawn? Ah, to announce night's closure,' Spinnock said, nodding. 'It is a constant source of surprise among us Tiste Andii that so many humans have remained. Such unrelieved darkness is a weight upon your souls, or so I have heard.'

'If there is no escape, aye, it can twist a mind into madness. But a short ride beyond the north gate, out to the Barrow, and bright day beckons. Same for the fishers sailing Outwater. Without such options, Spinnock, you Andii would indeed be alone in Black Coral. Moon's Spawn casts a shadow long after its death, or so the poets sing. But I tell you this,' Seerdomin leaned forward to refill his flagon, 'I welcome this eternal darkness.'

Spinnock knew as much, for the man seated opposite him carried a sorrow heavier than any shadow, and far darker; and in this he was perhaps more Tiste Andii than human, but for one thing, and it was this one thing that made it easy for Spinnock Durav to call the man friend. Seerdomin, for all his grief, was somehow holding despair back, defying the siege that had long ago defeated the Tiste Andii. A human trait, to be sure. More than a trait, a quality profound in its resilience, a virtue that, although Spinnock could not find it within himself – nor, it was true, among any fellow Tiste Andii – he could draw a kind of sustenance from none the less. At times, he felt like a parasite, so vital had this vicarious feeding become, and he sometimes feared that it was the only thing keeping him alive.

Seerdomin had enough burdens, and Spinnock was determined that his friend should never comprehend the necessity he had become – these games, these nights among the eternal Night, this squalid tavern and the pitchers of cheap, gassy ale.

'This one has worn me out,' the man now said, setting down his empty flagon. 'I thought I had you – aye, I knew the Gate tile was still unplayed. Two tiles to get past you, though, and everything would have been mine.'

There wasn't much to say to that. Both understood how that single gamble had decided the game. What was unusual was Seerdomin's uncharacteristic need to explain himself. 'Get some sleep,' Spinnock said.

Seerdomin's smile was wry. He hesitated, as if undecided whether or not to say something, or simply follow Spinnock's advice and stumble off to his home.

*Speak not to me of weakness. Please.*

'I have acquired the habit,' the man said, squinting as he followed some minor ruckus near the bar, 'of ascending the ruins. To look out over the Nightwater. Remembering the old cat-men and their families – aye, it seems they are breeding anew, but of course it will not be the same, not at all the same.' He fell silent for a moment, then shot Spinnock a quick, uneasy glance. 'I see your lord.'

The Tiste Andii's brows lifted. 'Anomander Rake?'

A nod. 'First time was a couple of weeks ago. And now . . . every time, at about the twelfth bell. He stands on the wall of the new keep. And, like me, he stares out to sea.'

'He favours . . . solitude,' Spinnock said.

'I am always suspicious of that statement,' Seerdomin said.

*Yes, I can see how you might be.* 'It is what comes from lordship, from rule. Most of his original court is gone. Korlat, Orfantal, Sorrit, Pra'iran. Vanished or dead. That doesn't make it any easier. Still, there are some who remain. Endest Silann, for one.'

'When I see him, standing alone like that . . .' Seerdomin looked away. 'It unnerves me.'

'It is my understanding,' observed Spinnock, 'that we all manage to do that, for you humans. The way we seem to haunt this city.'

'Sentinels with nothing to guard.'

Spinnock thought about that, then asked, 'And so too the Son of Darkness? Do you people chafe under his indifferent rule?'

Seerdomin grimaced. 'Would that all rulers were as indifferent. No, "indifferent" is not quite the right word. He is there where it matters. The

administration and the authority – neither can be challenged, nor is there any reason to do so. The Son of Darkness is . . . benign.'

Spinnock thought of the sword strapped to his lord's back, adding the tart flavour of inadvertent irony to his friend's words. And then he thought of the dead cities to the north. Maurik, Setta, Lest. 'It's not as if any neighbouring kingdoms are eyeing the prize that is Black Coral. They're either dead or, as in the south, in complete disarray. Thus, the threat of war is absent. Accordingly, what's left for a ruler? As you say, administration and authority.'

'You do not convince me, friend,' Seerdomin said, his eyes narrowing. 'The Son of Darkness, now is that a title for a bureaucrat? Hardly. Knight of Darkness to keep the thugs off the streets?'

'It is the curse of a long life,' Spinnock said, 'that in eminence one both rises and falls, again and again. Before this, there was a vast and costly war against the Pannion Domin. Before that, an even deadlier and far longer feud with the Malazan Empire. Before that, Jacuruku. Seerdomin, Anomander Rake has earned his rest. This peace.'

'Then perhaps he is the one who chafes. Staring out upon the harsh waters of the Cut, the twelfth bell tolling like a dirge in the gloom.'

'Poetic,' Spinnock said, smiling, but there was something cold in his heart, as if the image conjured by his friend's words was somehow *too* poignant. The notion sobered him. 'I do not know if my lord chafes. I have never been that important; little more than one warrior among thousands. I do not think we have spoken in centuries.'

Seerdomin's look was incredulous. 'But that is absurd!'

'Is it? See me, Seerdomin, I am too capricious. It is my eternal curse. I was never one for command, not even a squad. I got lost in Mott Wood, five days stumbling through briar and brush.' Spinnock laughed, waved one hand. 'A hopeless cause long ago, friend.'

'It's commonly held, Spinnock, that all you remaining Tiste Andii – survivors from all those wars – are perforce the élite, the most formidable

of all.'

'You were a soldier, so you know better than that. Oh, there are heroes aplenty among the Andii ranks. But just as many of us who were simply lucky. It's the way of things. We lost many great heroes in our battles against the Malazans.'

'A hopeless cause, you claim to be.' Seerdomin grimaced. 'Yet a master campaigner in Kef Tanar.'

'With soldiers of carved wood, I am most formidable. Living ones are another matter entirely.'

The man grunted, and seemed content to leave that one alone.

They sat in companionable silence for a time, as Resto delivered another pitcher of ale, and Spinnock was relieved, as the ale flowed from pitcher to flagon to mouth, that no more talk of past deeds in distant fields of battle arose that might unhinge the half-truths and outright lies he had just uttered.

And when the moment came when dawn unfurled its poppy blush upon the far eastern horizon, a moment unseen by any within the city of Black Coral, Spinnock Durav nodded, but mostly to himself. Eternal darkness or not, a Tiste Andii knew when light arrived. Another irony, then, that only the humans within Night were oblivious of the day's beginning, of the passage of the unseen sun beyond the gloom, of its endless journey across the sky.

Before they both got too drunk, they agreed upon the time for a new game. And when Seerdomin finally rose unsteadily to his feet, flinging a careless wave in Spinnock's direction before weaving out through the tavern door, Spinnock found himself wishing the man a safe journey home.

A most generous send-off, then, even if delivered in silence.

Anomander Rake would be setting out for the throne room by now, where he would steel himself to face the brutal demands of the day, the allocation of stipends, the merchant grievances to be adjudicated, reports on the status of supplies, one or two emissaries from distant free cities seeking trade agreements and mutual protection pacts (yes, plenty of those).

Oh, the Knight of Darkness fought all manner of beasts and demons, did he not?

Darkness surrendered. But then, it always did. There was no telling how long the journey took in that time within Kurald Galain, nor the vast distances covered, stride by stride by stride. All was in discord, all was unrelieved and unrelieving. Again and again, Nimander Golit seemed to startle awake, realizing with a shiver that he had been walking, an automaton in the midst of his comrades, all of whom glowed dully and appeared to float in an ethereal void, with the one named Clip a few paces ahead, striding with a purpose none of them could emulate. Nimander would then comprehend that, once more, he had lost himself.

Rediscovering where he was elicited no satisfaction. Rediscovering who he was proved even worse. The young man named Nimander Golit was little more than an accretion of memories, numbed by a concatenation of remembered sensations – a beautiful woman dying in his arms. Another woman dying beneath his hands, her face turning dark, like a storm cloud that could not burst, her eyes bulging, and still his hands squeezed. A flailing body flung through the air, crashing through a window, vanishing into the rain.

Chains could spin for eternity, rings glittering with some kind of life. Worn boots could swing forward, one after another like the blades of a pair of shears. Promises could be uttered, acquiescence forced like a swollen hand pushing into a tight glove. All could stand wearing their certainty. Or feeling it drive them forward like a wind that knew where it was going. All could wish for warmth within that embrace.

But these were empty things, bobbing before his eyes like puppets on tangled strings. As soon as he reached out, seeking to untangle those strings, to make sense out of it all, they would swing away, for ever beyond his reach.

Skintick, who seemed ready with a smile for everything, walked at his side yet half a step ahead. Nimander could not see enough of his cousin's face to know how Skintick had greeted the darkness that had stretched ever before them, but as that impenetrable abyss faded, and from the way ahead

emerged the boles of pine trees, his cousin turned with a smile decidedly wry.

'That wasn't so bad,' he murmured, making every word a lie and clearly delighting in his own mockery.

Damp air swirled round them now, cool in its caress, and Clip's steps had slowed. When he turned they could see the extent of his exhaustion. The rings spun once round on the chain in his hand, then snapped taut. 'We will camp here,' he said in a hoarse voice.

Some previous battle had left Clip's armour and clothes in tatters, with old bloodstains on the dark leather. So many wounds that, if delivered all at once, they should probably have killed him. Little of this had been visible that night on the street in Second Maiden Fort, when he had first summoned them.

Nimander and Skintick watched their kin settle down on the soft loam of the forest floor wherever they happened to be standing, blank-eyed and looking lost. Yes, *'explanations are ephemeral. They are the sword and shield of the attack, and behind them hides motivation. Explanations strive to find weakness, and from the exploitation of weakness comes compliance and the potential of absolute surrender.'* So Andarist had written, long ago, in a treatise entitled *Combat and Negotiation.*

Skintick, his long jester's face faintly pinched with weariness, plucked at Nimander's sleeve, gestured with a nod of his head then set out to one side, threading between trees. After a moment, Nimander followed.

His cousin halted some thirty paces from the makeshift camp, where he settled on to his haunches.

Across from him, Nimander did the same.

The sun was beginning to rise, bleeding light into the gloom of this forest. With it came the faint smell of the sea.

'Herald of Mother Dark,' Skintick said quietly, as if measuring the worth of the words. 'Mortal Sword. Bold titles, Nimander. Why, I've thought of

one for each of us too – not much else to occupy my time on that endless walk. Skintick, the Blind Jester of House Dark. Do you like it?'

'You're not blind.'

'I'm not?'

'What is it you wished to talk about?' Nimander asked.

'Not silly titles, I should think.'

'That depends. This Clip proudly asserts his own, after all.'

'You do not believe him?'

A half-smile. 'Cousin, there is very little I truly believe.

Beyond the oxymoronic fact that supposedly intelligent people seem to revel in being stupid. For this, I blame the chaotic tumult of emotions that devour reason as water devours snow.'

'"Emotions are the spawn of true motivations, whether those motivations be conscious or otherwise",' said Nimander.

'The man remembers what he reads. Making him decidedly dangerous, not to mention occasionally tedious.'

'What are we to discuss?' Nimander asked, in some exasperation.

'He can claim any title he wishes – we can do nothing about it, can we?'

'Well, we can choose to follow, or not follow.'

'Even that is too late. We have followed. Into Kurald Galain, and now here. And in the time ahead, to the journey's very end.'

'To stand before Anomander Rake, yes.' Skintick gestured at the surrounding forest. 'Or we could just walk away. Leave Clip to his dramatic accounting with the Son of Darkness.'

'Where would we go, then, Skintick? We don't even know where we are. What realm is this? What world lies beyond this forest? Cousin, we have nowhere else to go.'

'Nowhere, and anywhere. In the circumstances, Nimander, the former leads to the latter, like reaching a door everyone believes barred, locked tight, and lo, it opens wide at the touch. Nowhere and anywhere are states of mind. See this forest around us? Is it a barrier, or ten thousand paths leading into mystery and wonder? Whichever you decide, the forest itself remains unchanged. It does not transform to suit your decision.'

'And where is the joke in that, cousin?'

'Laugh or cry, simple states of mind.'

'And?'

Skintick glanced away, back towards the camp. 'I find Clip . . . amusing.'

'Why does that not surprise me?'

'He has created a vast, portentous moment, the moment when he finally stands face to face with the Son of Darkness. He hears martial music, the thunder of drums, or the howl of horns sweeping round the high, swaying tower where this fated meeting no doubt will occur. He sees fear in Anomander Rake's eyes, in answer to his own fury.'

'Then he is a fool.'

'Us young folk commonly are. We should tell him.'

'Tell him what? That he is a fool?'

Skintick's smile broadened briefly, then he met Nimander's eyes once more. 'Something more subtle, I should think.'

'Such as?'

'The forest does not change.'

Now it was Nimander's turn to glance away, to squint into the greyness of dawn, the misty wreaths shrouding the ankles of the trees. *She died in my arms. Then Andarist died, bleeding out on to the cobbles. And Phaed was pulled from my hands. Thrown through a window, down to her death. I met the eyes of her killer, and saw that he had killed her . . . for me.*

*The forest does not change.*

'There are,' Skintick said in a low voice, 'things worth considering, Nimander. We are six Tiste Andii, and Clip. So, seven. Wherever we now are, it is not our world. Yet, I am certain, it is the same world we have come to know, to even think of, as our own. The world of Drift Avalii, our first island prison. The world of the Malazan Empire, Adjunct Tavore, and the Isle that was our second prison.

The *same* world. Perhaps this here is the very land where waits Anomander Rake – why would Clip take us through Kurald Galain to some place far from the Son of Darkness? We might find him another league onward through this forest.'

'Why not to his front door?'

Skintick grinned his pleased grin. 'Indeed, why not? In any case, Anomander Rake will not be alone. There will be other Tiste Andii with him. A community. Nimander, we have earned such a gift, haven't we?'

To that, Nimander wanted to weep. *I have earned nothing. Beyond remonstration. Condemnation. The contempt of every one of them. Of Anomander Rake himself. For all my failures, the community will judge me, and that will be that.* Self-pity tugged at him yet further, but he shook it off. For these who followed him, for Skintick and Desra and Nenanda, Kedeviss and Aranatha, yes, he could give them this last gift.

Which was not even his to give, but Clip's. *Clip, my usurper*.

'And so,' he finally said, 'we come back to the beginning. We will follow Clip, until he takes us to our people.'

'I suppose you are right,' Skintick said, as if satisfied with the circular nature of their conversation, as if something had indeed been achieved by the effort – though Nimander could not imagine what that might be.

Birdsong to awaken the sky to light, a musty warmth hinted at in the soft breaths rising from the humus. The air smelled impossibly clean. Nimander rubbed at his face, then saw Skintick's almond-shaped eyes shift their gaze

to over his shoulder, and so he turned, even as a fallen branch crackled underfoot to announce someone's arrival.

Skintick raised his voice, 'Join us, cousin.'

Aranatha moved like a lost child, ever tremulous, ever diffident. Eyes widening – as they always did whenever she awakened to the outside world – she edged forward. 'I couldn't sleep,' she said. 'Nenanda was asking Clip about all sorts of things, until Desra told him to go away.'

Skintick's brows lifted. 'Desra? Stalking Clip now, is she? Well, my only surprise is that it's taken this long – not that there was much chance within Kurald Galain.'

Nimander asked her, 'Did Nenanda manage to get an explanation from Clip about where we are? And how far we still have to go?'

She continued creeping forward. The muted dawn light made her seem a thing of obsidian and silver, her long black hair glistening, her black skin faintly dusted, her silver eyes hinting of iron that never appeared. *Like some Goddess of Hope. But one whose only strength lay in an optimism immune to defeat. Immune to all reality, in fact.* 'We have emerged somewhere south of where we were supposed to. There are, Clip explained, "layers of resistance".' She shrugged. 'I don't understand what that means, but those were his words.'

Nimander briefly met Skintick's eyes, then smiled up at Aranatha. 'Did Clip say how much farther?'

'Farther than he'd hoped. Tell me, do either of you smell the sea?'

'Yes,' Nimander replied. 'Can't be far, either. East, I think.'

'We should go there – perhaps there will be villages.'

'You possess impressive reserves, Aranatha,' said Skintick.

'If it's not far . . .'

With a wry smile, Skintick straightened.

Nimander did the same.

It was simple enough to walk in the direction of the rising sun, clambering over tree-falls and skirting sinkholes. The only trails they crossed were those left by game – nothing taller than deer and so branches hung low over them – and none led to the sea. The air grew warmer, then, all at once, cooler, and ahead was the sound of wind singing through branches and leaves, and then the crashing of surf. Slanting bedrock pushed up between trees, forcing them to climb, scrambling up a sharply rising cant.

They emerged to find themselves atop a cliff of wind-scoured rock and stunted, twisted trees. The sea was before them, glittering fierce in the sun. Enormous swells rolled in, pounding the jagged, unforgiving shoreline far below. The coast to the north and the south was virtually identical as far as could be seen. Well out from shore, explosions of spume betrayed the presence of submerged reefs and shallows.

'Won't find any villages here,' Skintick said. 'I doubt we'd find much of anything, and as for skirting this coast, well, that looks to be virtually impossible. Unless, of course,' he added with a smile, 'our glorious leader can kick rock to rubble to make us a beach. Or summon winged demons to carry us over all this. Failing that, I suggest we return to our camp, burrow down into the pine needles, and go to sleep.'

No one objected, so they turned about to retrace their route.

Seeing the rage ever bridling and boiling beneath the surface of the young warrior named Nenanda was a constant comfort to Clip. This one he could work with. This one he could shape. His confidence in Nimander, on the other hand, was virtually non-existent. The man had been thrust into a leader's role and it clearly did not suit him. Too sensitive by far, Nimander was of the type that the world and all its brutal realities usually destroyed, and it was something of a miracle that it had not yet done so. Clip had seen such pathetic creatures before; perhaps indeed it was a trait among the Tiste Andii. Centuries of life became a travail, an impossible burden. Such creatures burned out fast.

No, Nimander was not worth his time. And Nimander's closest companion, Skintick, was no better. Clip admitted he saw something of himself in Skintick – that wry mockery, the quick sarcasm – yes, other traits

common among the Andii. What Skintick lacked, however, was the hard vicious core that he himself possessed in abundance.

Necessities existed. Necessities had to be recognized, and in that recognition so too must be understood all the tasks required to achieve precisely what was necessary. Hard choices were the only choices that could be deemed virtuous. Clip was well familiar with hard choices, and with the acceptable burden that was virtue. He was prepared to carry such a burden for the rest of what he anticipated would be a very, very long life.

Nenanda might well be worthy to stand at his side, through all that was to come.

Among the young women in this entourage, only Desra seemed potentially useful. Ambitious and no doubt ruthless, she could be the knife in his hidden scabbard. Besides, an attractive woman's attentions delivered their own reward, did they not? Kedeviss was too frail, broken inside just like Nimander, and Clip could already see death in her shadow. Aranatha was still a child behind those startled eyes, and perhaps always would be. No, of this entire group he had recruited from the Isle, only Nenanda and Desra were of any use to him.

He had hoped for better. After all, these were the survivors of Drift Avalii. They had stood at the side of Andarist himself, crossing blades with Tiste Edur warriors. With demons. They had tasted their share of blood, of triumph and grief. They should now be hardened veterans.

Well, he had managed with worse.

Alone for the moment, with Aranatha wandering off and probably already lost; with Nenanda, Desra and Kedeviss finally asleep; and with Nimander and Skintick somewhere in the woods – no doubt discussing portentous decisions on things relevant only to them – Clip loosened once again the chain and rings wrapped about his hand. There was a soft clink as the gleaming rings met at the ends of the dangling chain, each now spinning slowly, one counter to the other as proof of the power they held. Miniature portals appearing and disappearing, then reappearing once more, all bounded in cold metal.

The fashioning of these items had devoured most of the powers of the Andii dwelling in the subterranean fastness that was – or had been – the Andara. Leaving his kin, as it turned out, fatally vulnerable to their Letherii hunters. The cacophony of souls residing within these rings was now all that remained of those people, his pathetic family of misfits. And his to control.

Sometimes, it seemed, even when things didn't go as planned, Clip found himself reaping rewards.

*Proof, yes, that I am chosen.*

The chain swung, rings lifting up and out. Spun into a whine like the cries of a thousand trapped souls, and Clip smiled.

The journey from the Scour Tavern back to the New Palace skirted the ruins of the great fortress, the collapse of which had brought to an end the Pannion Domin. Unlit and now perpetually shrouded in gloom, the heaped rubble of black stone still smelled of fire and death. The ragged edge of this shattered monument was on Spinnock Durav's left as he walked the street now called Fringe Stagger. Ahead and slightly to the right rose Dragon Tower, and he could feel Silanah's crimson eyes on him from atop its great height. The regard of an Eleint was never welcome, no matter how familiar Silanah's presence among Rake's Tiste Andii.

Spinnock could well recall the last few times he had been witness to the dragon unleashed. Flames ripping through the forest that was Mott Wood, crashing down in a deluge, with a deafening concussion that drowned out every death-cry as countless unseen creatures died. Among them, perhaps a handful of Crimson Guard, a dozen or so Mott Irregulars. *Like using an axe to kill ants.*

Then, from the very heart of that fiery maelstrom, virulent sorcery lashed out, striking Silanah in a coruscating wave. Thunder hammering the air, the dragon's scream of pain. The enormous beast writhing, slashing her way free, then, trailing ropes of blood, flying back towards Moon's Spawn.

He recalled Anomander Rake's rage, and how he could hold it in his eyes like a demon chained to his will, even as he stood motionless, even as he

spoke in a calm, almost bored tone. A single word, a name.

*Cowl.* And with that name, oh, how the rage flared in those draconean eyes.

There had begun, then, a hunt. The kind only a fool would choose to join. Rake, seeking out the deadliest wizard among the Crimson Guard. At one point, Spinnock remembered standing on the high ledge on the face of Moon's Spawn, watching the mage-storms fill half the northern night sky. Flashes, the knight charge of thunder through a smoke-wreathed sky. He had wondered, then, if the world was on the very edge of being torn apart, and from the depths of his soul had risen a twisted, malignant thought. *Again . . .*

When great powers strode on to the field of battle, things had a way of getting out of hand.

Had it been Cowl who first blinked? Bowing out, yielding ground, fleeing?

Or had it been the Son of Darkness?

Spinnock doubted he would ever find out. Such questions were not asked of Anomander Rake. Some time later, it was discovered by the Tiste Andii, Cowl had resurfaced, this time in Darujhistan. Causing more trouble. His stay there had been blessedly brief.

Another vision of Silanah, laying the trap for the Jaghut Tyrant in the Gadrobi Hills. More wounds, more ferocious magic. Wheeling over the ravaged plain. Five Soletaken Tiste Andii whirling round her like crows escorting an eagle.

Perhaps he was alone, Spinnock reflected, in his unease with the alliance between the Tiste Andii and the Eleint. There had been a time, after all, when Anomander Rake had warred against the pure-blood dragons. When such creatures broke loose from their long-standing servitude to K'rul; when they had sought to grasp power for themselves. The motivation for Rake's opposition to them was, typically, obscure. Silanah's arrival – much later – was yet another event shrouded in mystery.

No, Spinnock Durav was far from thrilled by Silanah's bloodless regard.

He approached the arched entrance to the New Palace, ascending the flagstone ramp. There were no guards standing outside. There never were. Pushing open one of the twin doors, he strode inside. Before him, a buttressed corridor that humans would find unnaturally narrow. Twenty paces in, another archway, opening out into a spacious domed chamber with a floor of polished blackwood inset with the twenty-eight spiralling *terondai* of Mother Dark, all in black silver. The inside of the dome overhead was a mirror image. This homage to the goddess who had turned away was, to Spinnock's mind, extraordinary; appallingly out of place.

Oh, sages might well debate who had done the turning away back then, but none would dismiss the terrible vastness of the schism. Was this some belated effort at healing the ancient wound? Spinnock found that notion unfathomable. And yet, Anomander Rake himself had commissioned the *terondai*, the Invisible Sun and its whirling, wild rays of onyx flame.

If Kurald Galain had a heart in this realm's manifestation of the warren, it was here, in this chamber. Yet he felt no presence, no ghostly breath of power, as he made his way across the floor to the curling bone-white staircase. Just beyond the turn above wavered a pool of lantern light.

Two human servants were scrubbing the alabaster steps.

At his arrival they ducked away.

'Mind the wet,' one muttered.

'I'm surprised,' Spinnock said as he edged past, 'there's need to clean these at all. There are all of fifteen people living in this palace.'

'You've that, sir,' the man replied, nodding.

The Tiste Andii paused and glanced back. 'Then why are you bothering? I can hardly believe the castellan set you upon this task.'

'No sir, he never did. We was just, er, bored.'

After a bemused moment, Spinnock resumed his ascent. These short-lived creatures baffled him.

The journey to the chambers where dwelt the Son of Darkness was a lengthy traverse made in solitude. Echoing corridors, unlocked, unguarded doors. The castellan's modest collection of scribes and sundry bureaucrats worked in offices on the main floor; kitchen staff, clothes-scrubbers and wringers, hearth-keepers and taper-lighters, all lived and worked in the lower levels. Here, on the higher floors, darkness ruled a realm virtually unoccupied.

Reaching the elongated room that faced the Nightwater, Spinnock Durav found his lord.

Facing the crystal window that ran the entire length of the Nightwater wall, his long silver-white hair was faintly luminous in the muted, refracted light cast into the room by the faceted quartz. The sword Dragnipur was nowhere in sight.

Three steps into the chamber and Spinnock halted.

Without turning, Anomander Rake said, 'The game, Spinnock?'

'You won again, Lord. But it was close.'

'The Gate?'

Spinnock smiled wryly. 'When all else seems lost . . .'

Perhaps Anomander Rake nodded at that, or his gaze, fixed somewhere out on the waves of Nightwater, shifted downward to something closer by. A fisher boat, or the crest of some leviathan rising momentarily from the abyss. Either way, the sigh that followed was audible. 'Spinnock, old friend, it is good that you have returned.'

'Thank you, Lord. I, too, am pleased to see an end to my wandering.'

'Wandering? Yes, I imagine you might have seen it that way.'

'You sent me to a continent, Lord. Discovering the myriad truths upon it necessitated . . . fair wandering.'

'I have thought long on the details of your tale, Spinnock Durav.' Still Rake did not turn round. 'Yielding a single question. Must I journey there?'

Spinnock frowned. 'Assail? Lord, the situation there . . .'

'Yes, I understand.' At last, the Son of Darkness slowly swung about, and it seemed his eyes had stolen something from the crystal window, flaring then dimming like a memory. 'Soon, then.'

'Lord, on my last day, a league from the sea . . .'

'Yes?'

'I lost count of those I killed to reach that desolate strand. Lord, by the time I waded into the deep, enough to vanish beneath the waves, the very bay was crimson. That I lived at all in the face of that is—'

'Unsurprising,' Anomander Rake cut in with a faint smile, 'as far as your Lord is concerned.' The smile faded. 'Ah, but I have sorely abused your skills, friend.'

Spinnock could not help but cock his head and say, 'And so, I am given leave to wield soldiers of wood and stone on a wine-stained table? Day after day, my muscles growing soft, the ambition draining away.'

'Is this what you call a well-earned rest?'

'Some nights are worse than others, Lord.'

'To hear you speak of ambition, Spinnock, recalls to my mind another place, long, long ago. You and I . . .'

'Where I learned, at last,' Spinnock said, with no bitterness at all, 'my destiny.'

'Unseen by anyone. Deeds unwitnessed. Heroic efforts earning naught but one man's gratitude.'

'A weapon must be used, Lord, lest it rust.'

'A weapon overused, Spinnock, grows blunt, notched.'

To that, the burly Tiste Andii bowed. 'Perhaps, then, Lord, such a weapon must be put away. A new one found.'

'That time is yet to arrive, Spinnock Durav.'

Spinnock bowed again. 'There is, in my opinion, Lord, no time in the foreseeable future when you must journey to Assail. The madness there seems quite . . . self-contained.'

Anomander Rake studied Spinnock's face for a time, then nodded. 'Play on, my friend. See the king through. Until . . .' and he turned once more back to the crystal window.

There was no need to voice the completion of that sentence, Spinnock well knew. He bowed a third time, then walked from the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Endest Silann was slowly hobbling up the corridor. At Spinnock's appearance the old castellan glanced up. 'Ah,' he said, 'is our Lord within?'

'He is.'

The elder Tiste Andii's answering smile was no gift to Spinnock, so strained was it, a thing of sorrow and shame. And while perhaps Endest had earned the right to the first sentiment – a once powerful mage now broken – he had not to the second. Yet what could Spinnock say that might ease that burden? Nothing that would not sound trite. Perhaps something more . . . acerbic, something to challenge that self-pity—

'I must speak to him,' Endest said, reaching for the door.

'He will welcome that,' Spinnock managed.

Again the smile. 'I am sure.' A pause, a glance up into Spinnock's eyes. 'I have great news.'

'Yes?'

Endest Silann lifted the latch. 'Yes. I have found a new supplier of cadaver eels.'

'Lord of this, Son of that, it's no matter, izzit?' The man peeled the last of the rind from the fruit with his thumbknife, then flung it out on to the cobbles. 'Point is,' he continued to his companions, 'he ain't even human, is he? Just another of 'em hoary black-skinned demons, as dead-eyed as all the rest.'

'Big on husking the world, aren't ya?' the second man at the table said, winking across at the third man, who'd yet to say a thing.

'Big on lotsa things, you better believe it,' the first man muttered, now cutting slices of the fruit and lifting each one to his mouth balanced on the blade.

The waiter drew close at that moment to edge up the wick in the lantern on the table, then vanished into the gloom once more.

The three were seated at one of the new street-side restaurants, although 'restaurant' was perhaps too noble a word for this rough line of tables and unmatched wooden chairs. The kitchen was little more than a converted cart and a stretch of canvas roof beneath which a family laboured round a grill that had once been a horse trough.

Of the four tables, three were occupied. All humans – the Tiste Andii were not wont to take meals in public, much less engage in idle chatter over steaming mugs of Bastion kelyk, a pungent brew growing in popularity in Black Coral.

'You like to talk,' the second man prodded, reaching for his cup. 'But words never dug a ditch.'

'I ain't alone in being in the right about this,' the first man retorted. 'Ain't alone at all. It's plain that if the Lord Son was dead and gone, all this damned darkness would go away, an' we'd be back to normal wi' day 'n' night again.'

'No guarantees of that,' the third man said, his tone that of someone half asleep.

'It's plain, I said. Plain, an' if you can't see that, it's your problem, not ours.'

'Ours?'

'Aye, just that.'

'Plan on sticking that rind-snicker through his heart, then?'

The second man grunted a laugh.

'They may live long,' the first man said in a low grumble, 'but they bleed like anybody else.'

'Don't tell me,' the third man said, fighting a yawn, 'you're the mastermind behind what you're talking about, Bucch.'

'Not me,' the first man, Bucch, allowed, 'but I was among the first t'give my word an' swear on it.'

'So who is?'

'Can't say. Don't know. That's how they organize these things.'

The second man was now scratching the stubble on his jaw. 'Y'know,' he ventured, 'it's not like there's a million of 'em, is it? Why, half the adults among us was soldiers in the Domin, or even before. And nobody took our weapons or armour, did they?'

'Bigger fools them,' Bucch said, nodding. 'Arrogance like that, they should pay for, I say.'

'When's the next meeting?' the second man asked.

The third man stirred from his slouch on his chair. 'We were just off for that, Harak. You want to come along?'

As the three men rose and walked off, Seerdomin finished the last of his kelyk, waited another half-dozen heartbeats, and then rose, drawing his cloak round him, even as he reached beneath it and loosened the sword in its scabbard.

He paused, then, and formally faced north. Closing his eyes, he spoke a soft prayer.

Then, walking with a careless stride, he set off, more or less in the direction the three men were taking.

High on the tower, a red-scaled dragon's eyes looked down upon all, facets reflecting scenes from every street, every alley, the flurry of activity in the markets, the women and children appearing on flat rooftops to hang

laundry, figures wandering here and there between buildings. In those eyes, the city seethed.

Somewhere, beyond Night, the sun unleashed a morning of brazen, heady heat. It gave form to the smoke of hearth fires in the makeshift camps alongside the beaten tracks wending down from the north, until the pilgrims emerged to form an unbroken line on the trails, and then it lit into bright gold a serpent of dust that rode the winds all the way to the Great Barrow.

The destitute among them carried shiny shells collected from shoreline and tidal pools, or polished stones or nuggets of raw copper. The better off carried jewellery, gem-studded scabbards, strips of rare silk, Delantine linen, Daru councils of silver and gold, loot collected from corpses on battlefields, locks of hair from revered relatives and imagined heroes, or any of countless other items of value. Now within a day's march of the Great Barrow, the threat of bandits and thieves had vanished, and the pilgrims sang as they walked towards the vast, descended cloud of darkness to the south.

Beneath that enormous barrow of treasure, they all knew, lay the mortal remains of the Redeemer.

Protected for ever more by Night and its grim, silent sentinels.

The serpent of dust journeyed, then, to a place of salvation.

Among the Rhivi of North Genabackis, there was a saying. *A man who stirs awake the serpent is a man without fear. A man without fear has forgotten the rules of life.*

Silanah heard their songs and prayers.

And she watched.

Sometimes, mortals did indeed forget. Sometimes, mortals needed . . . reminding.

# CHAPTER THREE

And he knew to stand there
Would be a task unforgiving
Relentless as sacrifices made
And blood vows given
He knew enough to wait alone
Before the charge of fury's heat
The chants of vengeance
Where swords will meet
And where once were mortals
Still remain dreams of home
If but one gilded door
Could be pried open.
Did he waste breath in bargain
Or turn aside on the moment
Did he smile in pleasure
Seeking chastisement?

(See him still, he stands there
While you remain, unforgiving
The poet damns you
The artist cries out
The one who weeps
Turns his face away
Your mind is crowded
By the inconsequential
Listing the details
Of the minuscule
And every measure
Of what means nothing
To anyone

He takes from you every rage
Every crime . . . Whether you like it
Or you do not . . .
Sacrifices made
Vows given
He stands alone
Because none of you dare
Stand with him)

Fisher's challenge to his listeners,
breaking the telling of *The Mane of Chaos*

On this morning, so fair and fresh with the warm breeze coming down off the lake, there were arrivals. Was a city a living thing? Did it possess eyes? Could its senses be lit awake by the touch of footsteps? Did Darujhistan, on that fine morning, look in turn upon those who set their gazes upon it? Arrivals, grand and modest, footsteps less than a whisper, whilst others trembled to the very bones of the Sleeping Goddess. Were such things the beat of the city's heart?

But no, cities did not possess eyes, or any other senses. Cut stone and hardened plaster, wood beams and corniced façades, walled gardens and quiescent pools beneath trickling fountains, all was insensate to the weathering traffic of its denizens. A city could know no hunger, could not rise from sleep, nor even twist uneasy in its grave.

Leave such things, then, to a short rotund man, seated at a table at the back of the Phoenix Inn, in the midst of an expansive breakfast – to pause with a mouth crammed full of pastry and spiced apple, to suddenly choke. Eyes bulging, face flushing scarlet, then launching a spray of pie across the table, into the face of a regretfully hungover Meese, who, now wearing the very pie she had baked the day before, simply lifted her bleary gaze and settled a basilisk regard upon the hacking, wheezing man opposite her.

If words were necessary, then, she would have used them.

The man coughed on, tears streaming from his eyes.

Sulty arrived with a cloth and began wiping, gently, the mess from a motionless, almost statuesque Meese.

On the narrow, sloped street to the right of the entrance to Quip's Bar, the detritus of last night's revelry skirled into the air on a rush of wild wind. Where a moment before there had been no traffic of any sort on the cobbled track, now there were screaming, froth-streaked horses, hoofs cracking like iron mallets on the uneven stone. Horses – two, four, six – and behind them, in a half-sideways rattling skid, an enormous carriage, its back end crashing into the face of a building in a shattering explosion of plaster, awning and window casement. Figures flew from the careering monstrosity as it tilted, almost tipping, then righted itself with the sound of a house falling over. Bodies were thumping on to the street, rolling desperately to avoid the man-high wheels.

The horses plunged on, dragging the contraption some further distance down the slope, trailing broken pieces, plaster fragments and other more unsightly things, before the animals managed to slow, then halt, the momentum, aided in no small part by a sudden clenching of wooden brakes upon all six wheels.

Perched atop the carriage, the driver was thrown forward, sailing through the air well above the tossing heads of the horses, landing in a rubbish cart almost buried in the fête's leavings. This refuse probably saved his life, although, as all grew still once more, only the soles of his boots were visible, temporarily motionless as befitted an unconscious man.

Strewn in the carriage's wake, amidst mundane detritus, were human remains in various stages of decay; some plump with rotting flesh, others mere skin stretched over bone. A few of these still twitched or groped aimlessly on the cobbles, like the plucked limbs of insects. Jammed into the partly crushed wall of the shop the conveyance's rear right-side corner had clipped was a corpse's head, driven so deep as to leave visible but one eye, a cheek and one side of the jaw. The eye rolled ponderously. The mouth twitched, as if words were struggling to escape, then curled in an odd smile.

Those more complete figures, who had been thrown in various directions, were now slowly picking themselves up, or, in the case of two of them, not

moving at all – and by the twist of limbs and neck it was clear that never again would their unfortunate owners move of their own accord, not even to draw breath.

From a window on the second level of a tenement, an old woman leaned out for a brief glance down on the carnage below, then retreated, hands snapping closed the wooden shutters.

Clattering sounds came from within the partly ruined shop, then a muted shriek that was not repeated within the range of human hearing, although in the next street over a dog began howling.

The carriage door squealed open, swung once on its hinges, then fell off, landing with a rattle on the cobbles.

On her hands and knees fifteen paces away, Shareholder Faint lifted her aching head and gingerly turned it towards the carriage, in time to see Master Quell lunge into view, tumbling like a Rhivi doll on to the street. Smoke drifted out in his wake.

Closer to hand, Reccanto Ilk stood, reeling, blinking stupidly around before his eyes lit on the battered sign above the door to Quip's Bar. He staggered in that direction.

Faint pushed herself upright, brushed dust from her meat-spattered clothes, and scowled as scales of armour clinked down like coins on to the stones. From one such breach in her hauberk she prised loose a taloned finger, which she peered at for a moment, then tossed aside as she set out after Reccanto.

Before she reached the door she was joined by Sweetest Sufferance, the short, plump woman waddling but determined none the less as both her small hands reached out for the taproom's door.

From the rubbish cart, Glanno Tarp was digging himself free.

Master Quell, on his hands and knees, looked up, then said, 'This isn't our street.'

Ducking into the gloom of Quip's Bar, Faint paused briefly until she heard a commotion at the far end, where Reccanto had collapsed into a chair, one arm sweeping someone's leavings from the table. Sweetest Sufferance dragged up another chair and thumped down on it.

The three drunks who were the other customers watched Faint walk across the room, each of them earning a scowl from her.

Quip Younger – whose father had opened this place in a fit of ambition and optimism that had lasted about a week – was shambling over from the bar the same way his old man used to, and reached the table the same time as Faint.

No one spoke.

The keep frowned, then turned round and made his way back to the bar.

Master Quell arrived, along with Glanno Tarp, still stinking of refuse.

Moments later, the four shareholders and one High Mage navigator of the Trygalle Trade Guild sat round the table. No exchange of glances. No words.

Quip Younger – who had once loved Faint, long before anyone ever heard of the Trygalle Trade Guild and long before she hooked up with this mad lot – delivered five tankards and the first pitcher of ale.

Five trembling hands reached for those tankards, gripping them tight.

Quip hesitated; then, rolling his eyes, he lifted the pitcher and began pouring out the sour, cheap brew.

Kruppe took a mouthful of the dark magenta wine – a council a bottle, no less – and swirled it in his mouth until all the various bits of pie were dislodged from the innumerable crevasses between his teeth, whereupon he leaned to one side and spat on to the floor. 'Ah.' He smiled across at Meese. 'Much better, yes?'

'I'll take payment for that bottle right now,' she said.

'That way I can leave before I have to witness one more abuse of such an exquisite vintage.'

'Why, has Kruppe's credit so swiftly vanished? Decided entirely upon an untoward breaking of fast this particular morning?'

'It's the insults, you fat pig, piled one on another until it feels I'm drowning in offal.' She bared her teeth. 'Offal in a red waistcoat.'

'Aaii, vicious jab. Kruppe is struck to the heart . . . and,' he added, reaching once more for the dusty bottle, 'has no choice but to loosen said constricture of the soul, with yet another tender mouthful.'

Meese leaned forward. 'If you spit that one out, Kruppe, I will wring your neck.'

He hastily swallowed, then gasped. 'Kruppe very nearly choked once more. Such a morning! Portents and pastry, wails and wine!'

Heavy steps descending from the upper floor.

'Ah, here comes yon Malazan saviour. Mallet, dear friend of Kruppe, will Murillio – sweet Prince of Disenchantment – recover to his fullest self? Come, join me in this passing ferment. Meese, sweet lass, will you not find Mallet a goblet?'

Her eyes narrowed into thin slits. 'How about one for yourself, Kruppe?'

'Delightful suggestion.' Kruppe wiped at the bottle's mouth with one grimy sleeve, then beamed across at her.

She rose, stalked off.

The Malazan healer sat down with a heavy sigh, closed his eyes and rubbed vigorously at his round, pallid face, then looked round the bar. 'Where is everyone?'

'Your companion of the night just past Kruppe has sent home, with the assurance that your self is safe from all harm. 'Tis dawn, friend, or rather morning's fresh stumping on dawn's gilt heels. Ships draw in alongside berths, gangplanks clatter and thump to form momentous bridges from one

world to the next. Roads take sudden turns and out trundle macabre mechanisms scattering bits of flesh like dark seeds of doom! Hooded eyes scan strangers, shrikes cry out above the lake's steaming flats, dogs scratch vigorously behind the ears – ah, Meese has brought us her finest goblets! A moment, whilst Kruppe sweeps out cobwebs, insect husks and other assorted proofs of said goblets' treasured value – there, now, let us sit back and watch, with pleased eyes, as Meese fills our cups to brimming glory. Why—'

'For Hood's sake,' Mallet cut in, 'it's too early for your company, Kruppe. Let me drink this wine and then escape with my sanity, I beg you.'

'Why, friend Mallet, we await your assessment of Murillio's physical state.'

'He'll live. But no dancing for a week or two.' He hesitated, frowning down into his goblet, as if surprised to find it suddenly empty once more. 'Assuming he comes out of his funk, that is. A mired mind can slow the body's recovery. Can reverse it, in fact.'

'Fret not over Murillio's small but precise mind, friend,' Kruppe said. 'Such matters ever find solution through Kruppe's wise ministrations. Does Coll remain at bedside?'

Mallet nodded, set the goblet down and rose. 'I'm going home.' He glowered across at Kruppe. 'And with Oponn's pull, I might even get there.'

'Nefarious nuisances thrive best in night's noisome chaos, dear healer. Kruppe confidently assures you a most uneventful return to your atypical abode.'

Mallet grunted, then said, 'And how do you plan on assuring that?'

'Why, with worthy escort, of course!' He poured himself the last of the wine and smiled up at the Malazan. 'See yon door and illimitable Irilta positioned before it? Dastardly contracts seeking your sad deaths cannot indeed be permitted. Kruppe extends his formidable resources to guarantee your lives!'

The healer continued staring down at him. 'Kruppe, do you know who offered this contract?'

'Ringing revelations are imminent, treasured friend. Kruppe promises.'

Another grunt, then Mallet wheeled and walked towards the door and his escort, who stood smiling with brawny arms crossed.

Kruppe watched them leave and weren't they just quite the pair.

Meese slouched down in the chair Mallet had vacated. 'Guild contract,' she muttered. 'Could simply be some imperial cleaning up, you know. New embassy's now up and running after all. Could be somebody in it caught word of Malazan deserters running a damned bar. Desertion's a death sentence, ain't it?'

'Too great a risk, sweet Meese,' Kruppe replied, drawing out his silk handkerchief and blotting at his brow. 'The Malazan Empire, alas, has its own assassins, of which two are present in said embassy. Yet, by all accounts, 'twas a Hand of Krafar's Guild that made the attempt last night.' He raised a pudgy finger. 'A mystery, this one who so seeks the death of inoffensive Malazan deserters, but not a mystery for long, oh no! Kruppe will discover all that needs discovering!'

'Fine,' Meese said, 'now discover that council, Kruppe, for the bottle.'

Sighing, Kruppe reached into the small purse strapped to his belt, probed within the leather pouch, then, brows lifted in sudden dismay: 'Dearest Meese, yet another discovery . . .'

Grainy-eyed, Scorch scowled at the teeming quayside. 'It's the morning fisher boats,' he said, 'comin' in right now. Ain't no point in hangin' round, Leff.'

'People on the run will be coming here early,' Leff pointed out, scooping out with his knife the freshwater conch he had purchased a moment ago. He slithered down a mouthful of white, gleaming meat. 'T'be waitin' for the first ships in from Gredfallan. Midmorning, right? The new locks at Dhavran have made it all regular, predictable, I mean. A day through with a

final scoot to Gredfallan, overnight there, then on with the dawn to here. Desperate folk line up first, Scorch, 'cause they're desperate.'

'I hate sitting anywhere my feet have to dangle,' Scorch complained, shifting uncomfortably on the stack of crates.

'Decent line of sight,' Leff said. 'I'll join ya up there anon.'

'Don't know how you can eat that. Meat should have blood in it. Any meat without blood in it ain't meat.'

'Aye, it's conch.'

'It's a thing with eyes on the ends of its tentacles, watching as you cut its body apart – see how the stalks swivel, following up to your mouth, tracking every swallow? It's watching you eat it!'

'So what?'

Gulls shrieked in swarming clouds over the low jetties where the fishers were heaving baskets of sliverfish on to the slimy stone, children scurrying about in the hopes of being hired to slip the wriggling fish on to monger-strings in time for the morning market. Grey-backed Gadrobi cats, feral now for a thousand generations, leapt out in ambush to kill gulls. Frenzied battles ensued, feathers skirling, tufts of cat hair drifting on the breeze like thistle heads.

Below the inside docks old women wandered in the gloom between pylons, using long, thin, barbed pokers to collect up the small, hand's-length sliverfish that managed to slip through the baskets and fall in gleaming rain as the catch was carried ashore. When the harvest was small, the old hags were wont to use those toothed pokers on each other.

Scorch could see them from where he was perched, muffled forms moving this way and that, pokers darting in the perpetual shadows. 'I swore to never again eat anything this lake gave up,' he muttered. 'Gran above,' he added in a hoarse whisper, 'y'see I remember them cuts an' holes in your scrawny arms. I remember 'em, Gran, an' so I swore.'

'What's that?' Leff asked from below.

'Nothing, only we're wasting our time—'

'Patience, Scorch. We got us a list. We got us trouble. Didn't we hear that Brokul might be making a run?'

'The place is a damned mob, Leff.'

'We just need to concentrate on the lines forming up.'

'Ain't no lines, Leff.'

Leff tossed the shell over the end of the lake wall, where it clattered down below on to ten thousand others. 'Not yet,' he said. 'Soon.'

Just past the fork at Urs, the battered remnants of the caravan headed up towards South Worrytown. Herders and quarry workers on their way out to the Ravens edged to the sides of the road, then stopped and stared at the four charred and smoke-streaked trader-wagons rocking past. A single horse struggled in a makeshift yoke before each wain.

Of the usual assortment of guards that might be expected, even for a caravan as small as this one seemed to be, only one was visible, slouched down in a Gadrobi saddle and almost entirely hidden beneath a dusty, hooded cloak. From seamed slits in the faded brown cape, just above the man's shoulder blades, jutted the worn grips and pommels of twin cutlasses. The leather gauntlets covering his hands where they rested on the high saddle horn were stained and mostly in shreds, revealing to those close enough to see skin tattooed to very nearly solid black.

From the shadow of the hood, strangely feline eyes held fixed on the road ahead. The first decrepit shanties of South Worrytown emerged from the morning mist like the dishevelled nests of some oversized carrion bird, lining the dirt track to either side. From cracks and holes in the leaning walls, liquid eyes peered out as the guard led his clattering train past.

Before long, they were well and truly within the maze and its crowds of life's refugees, rising like ghosts from the shadows, raising faint voices to beg for coin and food. Few caravans coming up from the south chose this route into Darujhistan, since the track through the city's shabby outskirts was both narrow and twisting. And those that proved insufficiently

defended could become victims of the raw, desperate need drawing ever closer on all sides.

A hundred paces still south of the main road known as Jatem's Worry, it seemed that such a fate would befall this hapless caravan and its guardian of one.

As grasping, grimy hands reached out to close round spokes in wagon wheels, and others snatched at the traces of the horses, the hooded man glanced back at the growing boldness and reined in. As he did so he seemed to suddenly fill out as he straightened in his saddle.

Eyes fixed on him, furtive and wary and with fading diffidence. One rag-clad man swung up beside the first wagon's driver who, like the guard, was hooded and wrapped in a leather cape. As the Worrier clutched the driver's shoulder and yanked him round, the hood fell back.

Revealing a dead man's withered face. The mostly hairless head turned, hollow sockets settling on the man crouched on the bench.

Even as the Worrier shrieked, twisting to fling himself from the wagon, the lone caravan guard drew his cutlasses, revealing broad iron blades stained in a pattern of flaring barbs of black and pale orange. The hood dropped back to unveil a broad face tattooed in an identical fashion, the mouth opening to reveal long canines as the guard smiled. There was no humour in that smile, just the promise of mayhem.

That was enough for the crowd. Screaming, flinching back, they fled.

Moments later, the four wagons and their lone guard resumed their journey.

On to Jatem's Worry, edging into the traffic slowly working towards the city gate, where the lone, tattooed guard resheathed his weapons.

The unhooded corpse guiding the lead wagon seemed disinclined to readjust its head covering, and before too long the lifeless driver acquired a flapping, squawking escort of three crows, each fighting to find purchase on the grey, tattered pate. By the time the caravan reached the gate, the driver

sported one crow on its head and one on each shoulder, all busy tearing strips of desiccated meat from its face.

A gate-watcher stepped out to squint up at the barbed, bestial guard as he drew rein beneath the arch.

'Gruntle, ain't it? You been in a fight, man. Is this Sirik's caravan – gods below!' This last cry announced the watcher's discovery of the first wagon driver.

'Best just let us past,' Gruntle said in a low, rasping voice. 'I'm in no mood for more than one conversation, and that one belongs to Sirik. I take it he's done his move into his new estate?'

The man nodded, his face pale and his eyes a little wild. Stepping back, he waved Gruntle on.

The journey to Sirik's estate was blessedly brief. Past Despot's Barbican, then left, skirting High Gallows Hill before reaching the freshly plastered wall and broad, high-arched gate leading into the merchant's compound.

Word must have gone in advance for Sirik himself stood waiting, shaded from the morning sun by a servant with a parasol. A half-dozen armoured men from his private bodyguard were clustered round him. The merchant's expression descended in swift collapse upon seeing a mere four wagons roll into the compound. Curses rode the dusty air from the guards when they spied the first driver, whose centre crow at that moment decided to half spread its wings to regain balance as the withered hands twitched the traces, halting the wagon.

Gruntle reined in and slowly dismounted.

Sirik waved his hands in a helpless gesture. 'But – but—'

Drawing off his cloak revealed the damage on Gruntle's chain hauberk, the slashes through the black iron links, the gouges and punctures, the crusted blood. 'Dwell raiders,' he said in a rumble, grinning once more.

'But—'

'We gave good account,' Gruntle resumed, squinting at the guards behind the merchant. 'And if you'd let loose a few more of your precious preeners there, we might ha' done better still. The raiding party was a big one, a hundred shrieking savages. The fools torched the other wagons even as they looted 'em.'

One of the bodyguard, Sirik's scar-faced captain, stepped forward, scowling at the wagons. 'A hundred, was it? Against what, eight guards under your command, Gruntle? Do you take us for idiots? A hundred Dwell and you'd not be here.'

'No, Kest, you're not an idiot,' Gruntle allowed. 'Thick-skulled and a bully, but not an idiot.'

As the captain and his men bridled, Sirik held up a trembling hand. 'Gruntle, Gisp sits that wagon but he's dead.'

'He is. So are the other three.'

'But – but how?'

Gruntle's shrug was an ominous roll of his massive shoulders. 'Not sure,' he admitted, 'but they took my orders anyway – granted, I was desperate and yelling things I normally wouldn't, but by then I was the last one left, and with four surviving wagons and as many horses . . .' He shrugged again, then said, 'I'll take my pay now, Sirik. You've got half the Bastion kelyk you wanted and that's better than none.'

*'And what am I to do with four undead drivers?'* Sirik shrieked.

Gruntle turned, glared up at Gisp. 'Go to Hood, you four. Now.'

The drivers promptly slumped, sliding or tottering from their perches. The three crows picking at Gisp's shredded face set up an indignant squall, then flapped down to resume their meal once the body settled on the dust of the compound.

Sirik had recovered enough to show irritation. 'As for payment—'

'In full,' Gruntle cut in. 'I warned you we didn't have enough. Kest may not be an idiot, but you are, Sirik. And sixteen people died for it, not to

mention a hundred Dwell. I'm about to visit the Guild, as required. I get my pay in full and I'll keep my opinions to myself. Otherwise . . .' Gruntle shook his head, 'you won't be hiring any more caravan guards. Ever again.'

Sirik's sweat-sheathed face worked for a time, until his eyes found a look of resignation. 'Captain Kest, pay the man.'

A short time later, Gruntle stepped out on to the street. Pausing, he glanced up at the morning sky, then set out for home. Despite the heat, he donned his cloak and drew up the hood once more. The damned markings on his skin rose flush with battle, and took weeks to fade back into a ghostly tint. In the meantime, the less conspicuous he could make himself the better. He suspected that the hovel he called home was already barricaded by a murder of acolytes awaiting his return. The tiger-skinned woman who proclaimed herself High Priestess of the local temple would have heard the fierce battle cry of Trake's Mortal Sword, even at a distance of thirty or so leagues out on the Dwelling Plain. And she would be in a frenzy . . . again, desperate as ever for his attention.

But Gruntle didn't give a damn about her and the mangy losers she'd gathered to her temple. Killing those raiders had not been a task he had welcomed. No pleasure in spilling blood, no delight in his own savage rage. He'd lost friends that day, including the last pair who had been with him ever since Capustan. Such wounds were far deeper than those his flesh still carried, and they would take much longer to heal.

Mood foul despite the bulging purse of councils at his belt, he was disinclined to suffer the normal jostling necessary to navigate the city's major avenues and streets – one push or snarl too many and he'd be likely to draw blades and set about carving a path through the crowds, and then he'd have no choice but to flee Darujhistan or risk dangling from High Gallows Hill – and so once through the Estates Gate just south of Borthen Park, and down the ramp into Lakefront District, Gruntle took a roundabout route, along narrow, twisting alleys and rubbish-filled wends between buildings.

The few figures he met as he walked were quick to edge aside, as if struck meek by some instinct of self-preservation.

He turned on to one slightly wider track only to find it blocked by a tall carriage that looked as if it had been through a riot – reminding Gruntle that the fête was still on – although, as he drew closer and found himself stepping over withered, dismembered limbs and streaks of slowly drying blood, and when he saw the gaping hole in the carriage where a door should have been, with the dark interior still and grey with motionless haze, and the horses standing with hides crusted in dried sweat and froth – the entire mess unattended and seemingly immune to looting – he recognized that this was one of those damned Trygalle Guild carriages, well and truly infamous for sudden, inexplicable and invariably violent arrivals.

Just as irritating, the Trygalle was a clear rival to the city's own Caravanserai Guild, with its unprecedented shareholding system. Something the Caravanserai should have thought of long ago, although if what Gruntle had heard was anywhere near the truth, then the attrition rate among the Trygalle's shareholders was appallingly high – higher than any sane guard would accept.

Then again, he reconsidered, here he was, the lone survivor of Sirik's caravan, and despite the councils he now carried his financial return was virtually nothing compared to the profits Sirik would harvest from the kelyk, especially now that he didn't have to pay his drivers. Of course, he'd need to purchase new wagons and repair the ones Gruntle had delivered, but there was insurance to offset some of that.

As he edged round the carriage in the street, he was afforded a closer look, concluding, sourly, that the Trygalle built the bastards to weather just about anything. Scorched, gouged as if by the talons of plains bears, bitten and chopped at, gaudy paint peeled away as if splashed with acid. As battered as a war wagon.

He walked past the horses. Then, five strides onward, Gruntle turned about in surprise. That close and the beasts should have panicked – they *always* panicked. Even ones he had broken to his scent shivered uncontrollably beneath him until sheer nervous exhaustion dulled their fright. But here . . . he scowled, meeting the eyes of one of the leaders and seeing naught but jaded disinterest.

Shaking his head, Gruntle resumed his journey.

Damned curious. Then again, he could do with a horse like one of those.

*Better yet, how about a dead one? Dead as Gisp?*

The thought brought him back to certain un-pleasantries he didn't much want to think about at the moment. *Like my being able to command the dead.*

He was, he considered, too old to be discovering new talents.

The walrus-skin coracle bobbed perilously in the chop between two trader barges, at risk of being crushed between them before a frantic scull by the lone occupant squirted the craft through, to draw up moments later alongside a mud-smeared landing crowded with crayfish traps. The man who clambered up from the coracle was soaked from the hips down, and the knapsack he slung on to one shoulder sloshed, then began to drain incontinently as he worked his way up the dock to the worn stone steps that climbed to the quayside.

He was unkempt, his beard two or three days old, and the leathers he wore seemed a strange mix of those normally worn beneath armour and those a Nathii fisher might wear in a squall. The floppy sealskin hat covering his head was misshapen, sun-faded and salt-rimed. In addition to his knapsack he carried an odd-looking scimitar in a split scabbard bound together by frayed strips of leather. The serpent-head pommel revealed empty sockets where gems had once resided for eyes, fangs and collar. Tall, wiry, he moved with a vaguely furtive haste once he reached the quay, cutting through the crowds towards one of the feeder alleys on the other side of Front Street.

From the landing down on the water, someone was yelling, demanding to know who had left a half-awash coracle beside his cages.

Reaching the alley mouth, the man walked in a few paces, then paused in the shadow between the high-walled warehouses. He drew off his floppy hat and wiped the grime from his brow. His black hair, while thinning from the front, hung in a long ponytail that had been tucked up beneath the hat

but now fell to the small of his back. His forehead and face were seamed in scars, and most of his left ear was missing, slashed away some time past. Scratching a moment at his beard, he settled the hat back on, and headed off down the alley.

He was set upon less than ten paces later, as two figures closed on him from alcoves, one to either side. The one on his left jammed the point of a dagger against his ribs, while the other waved a shortsword in front of his eyes, using it to direct the man against a grimy wall.

Mute, the man complied. In the gloom he squinted at the one with the sword, then scowled. 'Leff.'

A stained grin. 'Hey, old partner, fancy you showing up.'

The one with the knife snorted. 'Thought we'd never spy you out wi' that stupid hat, did you?'

'Scorch! Why, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you both. Gods below, I would've thought you two would have met grisly ends long ago. But this is a great discovery, friends! Had I any coin – any at all – why, I'd buy you both a drink—'

'Enough of that,' Leff said in a growl, still waving the sword in front of the man's face. 'You're on our list, Torvald Nom. Aye, way down on it since most people figured you were long gone and almost as long dead. But you ran out on a debt – a big one and bigger now, aye – not to mention running out on me and Scorch—'

'Hardly! I seem to recall we formally absolved our partnership, after that night when—'

Scorch hissed, 'Quiet, damn you! Nobody knows nothing about none of that!'

'My point was,' Torvald hastily explained, 'I never ran out on you two.'

'Don't matter,' Leff said, 'since that ain't why you're on the list now, is it?'

'You two must be desperate, to take on one of those—'

'Maybe we are,' said Scorch, 'and maybe we ain't. Now, you saying you're broke is bad news, Torvald. For you more'n us, since we now got to deliver you. And my, won't Lender Gareb be pleased.'

'Wait! I can get that money – I can clear that debt. But I need time—'

'No time to give ya,' Leff said, shaking his head. 'Sorry, old friend.'

'One night, that's all I'm asking.'

'One night, for you to run as far as you can.'

'No, I swear it. Gods, I've just returned! Here to honour all my debts!'

'Really, and how are you planning to do that?'

'Best leave the details to me, Scorch, just to keep you and Leff innocent. Now, I'm way down on that list – I'd have to be, since it's been years. That means nobody's expecting you to come up with me, right? Give me a night, just one, that's all I'm asking. We can meet again right here, this time tomorrow. I won't run out on you two, I promise.'

'You must think we're idiots,' Leff said.

'Listen, once I've cleared Gareb's debt, I can help you. With that list. Who's better than me at that kind of stuff?'

Scorch's disbelieving expression stretched his face until it seemed his eyes would fall out of their sockets. He licked his lips, shot Leff a glance.

Torvald Nom saw all this and nodded. 'Aye, you two are in trouble, all right. Those lists chew up whoever takes 'em on. I must tell you, I'm amazed and, well, deeply disappointed to find that you two have sunk that far since I left. Gods, if I'd known, well, I might've considered staying—'

Leff snorted. 'Now that's a damned lie.'

'All right, perhaps an exaggeration. So what is Gareb saying I'm owing him now?'

'A thousand silver councils.'

Torvald Nom gaped, the colour leaving his face. 'For Hood's sake, he just bought me a supper and a pitcher or two! And even then, I figured he was simply being generous. Wanted me to do some work for him or something. I was insulted when he sent me a bill for that night—'

'Interest, Torvald,' said Leff. 'You know how it is.'

'Besides,' added Scorch, 'you just up and ran. Where ya been all this time?'

'You'd never believe me.'

'Is that shackle scars on your wrists?'

'Aye, and worse. Nathii slave pens. Malazan slavers – all the way to Seven Cities. Beru fend, my friends, none of it was pretty. And as for the long journey back, why, if I was a bard I'd make a fortune spinning that tale!'

The sword hovering in front of his face had wavered, dipped, and now finally fell away, while the knife point jabbing his ribs eased back. Torvald looked quickly into both faces before him, and said, 'One night, old friends, and all this will be cleared up. And I can start helping you with that list.'

'We already got us help,' Leff said, although he didn't seem pleased by that admission.

'Oh? Who?'

'Kruppe. Remember him?'

'That oily, fat fence always hanging out at the Phoenix Inn? Are you two mad?'

Scorch said, 'It's our new taproom, Torvald, ever since Bormen threw us out for—'

'Don't tell him stuff like that, Scorch!'

'One night,' Torvald said, nodding. 'Agreed? Good, you won't regret it.'

Stepping back, Leff sheathed his shortsword. 'I already do. Listen, Torvald. You run and we'll chase you, no matter where you go. You can jump straight back into the Nathii slave pens and we'll be there right beside you. You understanding me?'

Torvald frowned at the man for a moment, then nodded. 'That I do, Leff. But I'm back, now, and I'm not going anywhere, not ever again.'

'One night.'

'Aye. Now, you two better head back to watching the quay – who knows who might be readying to flee on the next outbound ship.'

Both men suddenly looked nervous. Leff gave Torvald a push as he worked past, Scorch on his heels. Torvald watched them scurry to the alley mouth, then plunge into the crowd on Front Street.

'How is it,' he asked under his breath, of no one, 'that complete idiots just live on, and on? And on?'

He adjusted his Moranth raincape, making certain that none of the items secreted in the underside pockets had been jostled loose or, gods forbid, broken. Nothing dripping. No burning sensations, no slithering presence of . . . whatever. *Good.* Tugging down his floppy hat, he set off once more.

This thing with Gareb was damned irritating. Well, he'd just have to do something about it, wouldn't he? *One night. Fine. So be it. The rest can wait.*

*I hope.*

Born in the city of One Eye Cat twenty-seven years ago, Humble Measure was of mixed blood. A Rhivi woman, sold to a local merchant in exchange for a dozen bars of quenched iron, gave birth to a bastard son a year later. Adopted into his father's household eight years on, the boy was apprenticed in the profession of ironmongery and would have inherited the enterprise if not for one terrible night when his sheltered, stable world ended.

A foreign army had arrived, investing the city in a siege. Days and nights of high excitement for the young man, then, with the streets aflame with

rumours of the glory promised by the city's membership in the great, rich Malazan Empire – if only the fools in the palace would capitulate. His father's eyes had glowed with that imagined promise, and no doubt it was on the rising tide of such visions that the elderly trader conspired with agents of the Empire to open the city gates one night – an attempt that ended in catastrophic failure, with the merchant suffering arrest and then execution, and his estate invaded by city garrison soldiers with swords drawn.

That assault had left nightmare memories that would never leave Humble Measure. Witnessing his mother's rape and murder, and that of his half-sisters. Screams, smoke and blood, everywhere blood, like the bitter gift of some dark god – oh, he would remember that blood. Beaten and in chains, he had been dragged into the street and would have suffered the same fate as the others if not for the presence of a mercenary company allied with the city. Its commander, a tall, fierce warrior named Jorrick Sharplance, had taken command of the handful of surviving prisoners.

That company was subsequently driven from One Eye Cat by the city's paranoid rulers, sailing out on ships across Old King Lake, shortly before yet another act of treachery proved more successful than the first attempt. Another night of slaughter, this time at the bloodied hands of Claw assassins, and One Eye Cat fell to the Malazan Empire.

Jorrick Sharplance had taken his prisoners with him, setting them free on the wild south shore of the lake, at the very feet of One Eye Range, with sufficient supplies to take them through the mountain passes on to the Old King Plateau. From there, Humble Measure had led his household's survivors, slaves and free citizens alike, down the trader tracks to the city of Bear. A brief stay there, then southward to Patch and on to the Rhivi Trail.

A short stay in Pale, until, fleeing yet another Malazan siege, down to Darujhistan in the midst of a decrepit column of refugees.

Whereupon Humble Measure had settled in the last surviving office of his father's business, there to begin a long, careful rebuilding process that honed his tactical skills and, indeed, his fortitude.

Such a long, fraught journey had ensured the loyalty of his staff. The slaves were rewarded with emancipation, and not one refused his offer of employment. His trade in iron burgeoned. For a time, it seemed that the curse that was the Malazan Empire might well track him down once more, but there had been a gift, a gift of blood that he well understood now, and the city's life had been spared.

For how long? Humble Measure was well acquainted with how the Empire got things done. Infiltration, clever acts of destabilization, assassinations, the fomenting of panic and the dissolution of order. That they now had an embassy in the city was no more than a means of bringing their deadly agents into Darujhistan. Well, he was done running.

His father's ancestors had traded in iron for twelve generations. Here in the office in the Gadrobi District of Darujhistan, in the vaults far below street level, he had found written records reaching back almost six hundred years. And among the most ancient of those vellum scrolls, Humble Measure had made a discovery.

Darujhistan would not fall to the Malazan Empire – he had found the means to ensure that. To ensure, indeed, that no foreign power could ever again threaten the city he now called home, ever again endanger his family, his loved ones.

To achieve this, Humble Measure well understood that he would need all his acumen in bringing complicated plans to fruition. He would need vast sums of coin, which he now had at his disposal. And, alas, he would need to be ruthless.

Unpleasant, yes, but a necessary sacrifice.

The central office of Eldra Iron Mongers was a sprawling collection of buildings, warehouses and work yards just north of Two-Ox Gate. The entire complex was walled and virtually self-contained. Three sets of forges fronted an elongated, single-storey foundry resting against the west wall. Beneath it ran a subterranean stream that provided outflow into the Maiten River, the effluent and wastes issuing from that stream giving the bay beyond its name of Brownrun, and most days the stain spread out far on to

Lake Azure, an unfortunate consequence of working iron, as he said often to city officials when the complaints of the Gadrobi fishers grew too strident to ignore. Offers of recompense usually sufficed to silence such objections, and as for the faintly bitter irony Humble Measure felt when paying out these sums – an irony founded on the cold fact that iron was needed by all, the demand unending, from fish-hooks to gaffs to armour and swords – well, he wisely kept that to himself.

The administration building rose against the south wall of the compound, both office and residence. Staff quarters dominated the wing nearest the south end of the foundry. The central block housed the records and clerical chambers. The final wing was the oldest part of the structure, its foundations dating back to an age when bronze was the primary metal, and civilization was still a raw promise. Far beneath the ground level of this wing, ancient stairs wound down through layers of limestone, opening out on to a succession of rough-hewn vaults that had been used as storage rooms for generations. Long before such mundane usage, Humble Measure suspected, these crypts had held a darker purpose.

He had recently converted one such chamber into a secret office, wherein he could work alone, protected by a skein of long-dormant wards, and here he would remain for most of each night, strangely tireless, as if the very nobility of his cause blessed him with inhuman reserves – further proof to his mind that his efforts had begun to yield gifts, a recognition of sorts, from powers few even suspected still existed.

His thoughts were on such matters even during the day, and this day in particular, when his most loyal servant – the only man who knew of the secret crypts and, indeed, of Humble Measure's master plan – entered his office and placed a small wax book on his desk, then departed.

A sudden quickening of anticipation, quickly crushed once he opened the book and read the message scribed into the wax.

Most unfortunate. Four assassins, all failing. The Guild assured him that such failure would not be repeated.

So, the targets had proved themselves to be truly as dangerous as Humble Measure had suspected. Sour consolation, alas. He set the book down and reached for the roller on its heated plate. Carefully melted away the message.

The Guild would have to do better. Lest he lose faith and seek . . . other means.

In the yards beyond, bars of iron clanged as they were rolled from pallets on to the rail-beds leading to the warehouse, like the sudden clash of armies on a field of battle. The sound made Humble Measure wince.

Whatever was necessary. *Whatever was necessary.*

In a very short time the foreign ship edging ever closer to the Lowstone Pier captured the attention of the crowds on the quayside, sufficient to dampen the constant roar of the hawkers, stevedores, fortune-tellers, prostitutes, carters, and fisherfolk. Eyes widened. Conversations died as lungs snatched air and held it taut in numbed shock. A sudden laugh yelped, swiftly followed by others.

Standing at the bow of the low-slung ship, one pale, perfect hand resting on the carved neck of the horsehead prow, was a woman. If not for her stunning, ethereal beauty, her poise was so regal, so haughty, that it would have verged on caricature. She was swathed in a diaphanous blouse of emerald green that flowed like water in a glacial stream. She wore a broad black leather belt in which were thrust three naked-bladed daggers, and beneath that, tight-fitting, tanned leather breeches down to rawhide leggings. Behind her, on the deck and in the rigging, swarmed a score of bhokarala, while three more fought over the steering oar.

All harbours the world over possessed tales of outrageously strange arrivals, but none matched this, or so it would be claimed by the witnesses in homes and bars for years to come. As the ship glided closer to the pier, disaster seemed imminent. Bhokarala were mere apes, after all, perhaps as smart as the average dog. Crewing a ship? Ridiculous. Drawing into berth with deft precision? Impossible. Yet, at the last moment, the three creatures struggling for control of the steering oar miraculously heeled the ship over.

The straw bumpers barely squeezed between hull and stone as the craft nudged the pier. Lines sailed out in chaotic profusion, only a few within reach of the dockside handlers – but enough to make the ship fast. High on the main mast, the topsail luffed and snapped, then the yard loosened and the canvas folded as it dropped down, temporarily trapping a bhokaral within it, where the creature squawked and struggled mightily to free itself.

Down on the main deck, bhokarala rushed from all directions to fight over the gangplank, and all on the quayside watched as the grey, warped board jutted and jerked on its way down to clatter on the pier's stones, a task that resulted in three or four of the black, winged beasts falling into the water with piteous squeals.

A dozen paces away stood a clerk of the harbour master's office, hesitating overlong on his approach to demand moorage fees. The dunked bhokarala clambered back on to the deck, one with a large fish in its mouth, enticing others to rush in to fight over the prize.

The woman had stepped back from her perch alongside the prow, but instead of crossing the main deck to disembark, she vanished down through the cabin hatch.

The clerk edged forward then quickly retreated as a half-dozen bhokarala crowding the rail near the gangplank bared their fangs at him.

Common among all crowds, fascination at novelty was short-lived, and before too long, as nothing else of note occurred beyond the futile attempts by the clerk to extract moorage fees from a score of winged apes that did little more than snarl and make faces at him – one going so far as to pelt him with a fresh fish-head – fixed regard wavered and drifted away, back to whatever tasks and whatever demands had required attention before the ship's appearance. Word of the glorious woman and her absurd crew raced outward to infest the city, swift as starlings swirling from street to street, as the afternoon stretched on.

In the captain's cabin aboard the ship, Scillara watched as Sister Spite, a faint smile on her full lips, poured out goblets of wine and set them down before her guests seated round the map-table. That smile collapsed into a

sad frown – only slightly exaggerated – when Cutter twisted in his chair, too frustrated to accept the peaceable gesture.

'Oh, really,' Spite said, 'some maturity from you would be a relief right now. Our journey has been long, yes, but I do reiterate that delaying our disembarkation until dusk remains the wisest course.'

'I have no enemies here,' Cutter said in a belligerent growl. 'Only friends.'

'Perhaps that is true,' Spite conceded, 'but I assure you, young assassin, Darujhistan is not the city you left behind years past. Fraught, poised on the very edge of great danger—'

'I know that! I feel it – I felt it before I ever came aboard your cursed ship! Why do you think just sitting here, doing nothing, strikes me as the worst decision possible? I need to see people, I need to warn—'

'Oh dear,' Spite cut in, 'do you truly believe that you alone are aware of the danger? That all hangs in the balance right there at your fingertips? The arrogance of youth!'

Scillara filled her pipe with rustleaf and spent a moment sparking it alight. Heavy, brooding emotions filled the cabin. Nothing new in that, of course. This entire journey had been chaotic and contrary from the moment she, Cutter, Barathol and Chaur had been fished from the seas even as the sky flung giant gobbets of fire down on all sides. Worshipful bhokarala, a miserable mule, an old hag who collapsed into a heap of spiders if one so much as looked askance in her direction. A scrawny, entirely mad High Priest of Shadow, and a broken-hearted Trell. And while Spite comported herself with all the airs of a coddled princess, she was in truth a Soletaken sorceress, dreadfully powerful and as dangerously fey as some Elder Goddess. No, a more motley shipload of passengers and crew Scillara could not imagine.

*And now here we are. Poor Darujhistan!* 'Won't be long now,' she said to Cutter. 'We're better off trying to stay as far beneath notice as possible.'

Iskaral Pust, seated on his chair with his legs drawn up so that his toad-like face was between his knees, seemed to choke on that comment; then,

reddening and eyes bulging, he scowled at the table. 'We have a crew of mad apes!' His head tilted and he stared agog at Scillara. 'We could smoke dried fish with her – just hang 'em in her hair! Of course, the fish'd end up poisoning us all, which might be her plan all along! Keep her away from food and drink – oh yes, I have figured her out. No High Priest of Shadow can be fooled so easily! Oh, no. Now, where was I?' His brows knitted, then suddenly rose threateningly as he glared at her. 'Beneath notice! Why not just sneak out in that cloud of yours, woman?'

She blew him a smoky kiss.

Spite set her goblet down. 'The dispositions facing us now are probably worth discussing, don't you think?'

This question, addressed to everyone, yielded only blank stares.

Spite sighed. 'Mappo Runt, the one you seek is not on this continent. Even so, I would advise you cross overland here, perhaps as far as Lamatath, where you should be able to procure passage to the fell empire of Lether.'

The Trell studied her from beneath his heavy brows. 'Then I shall not linger.'

'Oh, he mustn't linger,' Iskaral Pust whispered. 'No no no. Too much rage, too much grief. The giant oaf cannot linger, or worse *malinger*. Malingering would be terrible, and probably against the law anyway. Yes, perhaps I could get him arrested. Locked up, forgotten in some nefarious dungeon. Oh, I must cogitate on this possibility, all the while smiling benignly!' And he smiled.

Mogora snorted. 'Husband,' she said sweetly, 'I have divined your fate. In Darujhistan you shall find your nemesis, a catastrophic clash. Devastation, misery for all, the unleashing of horrible curses and ferocious powers. Ruin, such ruin that I dream each night of blessed peace, assured that the universe is in balance once more.'

'I can hardly imagine,' Spite said, 'Shadow imposing balance of any sort. This husband of yours serves a diabolical god, a most unpleasant god. As

for your divination, Mogora, I happen to know that you possess no such talents—'

'But I can hope, can't I?'

'This is not the world for wishful thinking, dear.'

'Don't you "dear" me! You're the worst kind of witch, a good-looking one! Proof that charm is naught but a glamour—'

'Oh, wife,' Iskaral Pust crooned, 'would that you could glamour yourself. Why, an end to my nausea—'

With a snarl Mogora veered into a seething mass of spiders, spilling down over the chair and on to the plank floor, then scattering in all directions.

Iskaral Pust snickered at the others. 'That's why I sit like this, you fools. She'll bite you all, at every chance!' He jabbed a gnarled finger at Scillara. 'Except you, of course, because you make her sick!'

'Good,' she replied, then glanced across at Barathol. The huge black-skinned man was half smiling as he observed the others. Behind him stood Chaur, his foolish grin unwavering even as he tried stamping on spiders. 'And what of you, blacksmith? Eager to explore this grand city of blue fire?'

Barathol shrugged. 'I believe I am, although it has been some time since I last found myself among crowds. I imagine I might even enjoy the anonymity.' He seemed to take note of his hands where they rested on the table before him, and saw something in their skein of scars that made him frown, then slowly withdraw them from view. His dark eyes shifted from hers, almost shyly.

Not one for grand confessions, Scillara well knew. A single regret could crush a thousand proud deeds, and Barathol Mekhar had more regrets than most mortals could stomach. Nor was he young enough to brazen his way through them, assuming, of course, that youth was indeed a time of bold fearlessness, that precious disregard for the future that permitted, well, almost anything, so long as it served an immediate need.

'I admit,' said Spite, 'to a certain melancholy when visiting vibrant cities, as is this Darujhistan. A long life teaches one just how ephemeral is such thriving glory. Why, I have come again upon cities I knew well in the age of their greatness, only to find crumbled walls, dust and desolation.'

Cutter bared his teeth and said, 'Darujhistan has stood for two thousand years and it will stand for another two thousand – even longer.'

Spite nodded. 'Precisely.'

'Well, we hardly have the leisure of living for millennia, Spite—'

'You clearly weren't listening,' she cut in. 'Leisure is not a relevant notion. Consider the weariness that often afflicts your kind, late in their lives. Then multiply that countless times. This is the burden of being long-lived.'

'A moment, then, while I weep for you,' Cutter said.

'Such ingratitude! Very well, young man, please do leave us now, and if this be the last I see of you then I will indeed know the reward of leisurely comportment!'

Cutter rubbed at his face and seemed but moments from pulling at his own hair. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it. 'I'll wait,' he muttered.

'Really?' Spite's thin, perfect brows rose. 'Then perhaps an apology is forthcoming?'

'Sorry,' Cutter said in a mumble. 'It's just that, with what I fear is about to happen to my city, then wasting time – any time at all – well, it's not easy.' He shrugged.

'Apologies with caveats are worthless, you know,' Spite said, rising. 'Is it dusk yet? Can't you all crawl off to your bunks for a time? Or wander the hold or something? For all that rude Cutter frets over things he cannot control, I myself sense the presence of . . . personages, residing in Darujhistan, of a nature to alarm even me. Accordingly, I must think for a time . . . preferably alone.'

Scillara rose. 'Let's go, Cutter,' she said, taking his arm.

Trailed by Chaur, Barathol followed the Trell warrior down into the hold. There were no berths aboard large enough to accommodate Mappo, so he had fashioned an abode of sorts amidst bales of supplies. Barathol saw that the Trell had already packed his kit, hammock, armour and weapons all stuffed into a lone sack knotted at the mouth by a rawhide cord, and now he sat on a crate, glancing up to regard the blacksmith.

'You wish to speak of something, Barathol?'

'Spite tells me that the Trell were driven from this continent long ago.'

'My people have been assailed for thousands of years.' He shrugged his massive shoulders. 'Perhaps we are so ugly to others that our very existence is unacceptable.'

'You have a long journey ahead,' Barathol said. 'My thought is—'

But Mappo raised a hand. 'No, my friend. I must do this alone.'

'To cross an entire continent, in the face of hostility – possibly on all sides – Mappo, someone must guard your back.'

The Trell's dark, deep-set eyes studied him for a half-dozen heartbeats. 'Barathol Mekhar, we have come to know each other well on this journey. I could not imagine anyone better to guard my back than you.' He shook his head. 'I do not intend to cross the continent. There are . . . other paths. Perhaps indeed more perilous, but I assure you I am not easy to kill. The failure was mine and to make it right, well, the responsibility is mine and mine alone. I will not – I *cannot* – accept that others risk their lives on my behalf. Not you, friend. Not blessed Chaur. Please, leave me to this.'

Barathol sighed. 'You force upon me an even more terrible choice, then.'

'Oh?'

A wry grin. 'Aye. What to do with my life.'

Mappo grunted a laugh. 'I would not call that terrible, at least from my own point of view.'

'I understand what it is to be driven,' Barathol said. 'I think that is *all* that I understand. Back in Seven Cities, well, I'd almost convinced myself that what I'd found was all I needed, but I was lying to myself. Some people, I now believe, cannot just . . . retire. It feels too much like surrender.'

'You were a blacksmith—'

'By default. I was a soldier, Mappo. A Red Blade.'

'Even so, to work iron is a worthy profession. Perhaps you were a soldier, once, but to set down your weapons and find another profession is not surrender. Yet if it feels so to you, well, this city is no doubt crowded with estates, many of which would welcome a guard of your experience. And there will be merchants, operating caravans. Indeed, the city must have its own garrison – no warrior ever fears unemployment, for their skills are ever in demand.'

'A sad admission, Mappo.'

The Trell shrugged again. 'I would think, now, Barathol, that if anyone needs his back guarded, it is Cutter.'

Barathol sighed in frustration. 'He says little of what he plans to do. In any case, this is his city. He will find those who know enough to protect him. Besides, I must admit, having seen Cutter practise with those knives of his, well, perhaps it is Darujhistan that must fear his return.'

'He is too precipitous.'

'I trust Scillara to rein him in.'

'Barathol, let us now make our farewells. I intend to depart soon.'

'And had I not followed you down here?'

'I do poorly saying goodbye.' His gaze shied away.

'Then I will convey such to the others, on your behalf. Cutter will be . . . upset. For he has known you the longest among us all.'

'I know, and I am sorry – in so many ways I am a coward.'

But Barathol well understood. This was not cowardice. It was some sort of shame, twisted past any possible reason, any conceivable justification. The loss of Icarium was a wound so raw, so irreconcilable, that its spreading stain swept all from its path. Friends, loyalties, lives and histories. And Mappo could not fight against that onrushing tide and the fate he sought at its very end. There would be grief at that conclusion, Barathol suspected, of incalculable measure.

If Icarium Lifestealer was not yet unleashed, he would be soon. Mappo would be too late to prevent that. It was difficult, then, to leave the Trell to all that awaited him, to simply turn away, yet what else could he do, when Mappo's own desires were so clear? 'I will leave you to your . . . paths, then, Mappo. And I wish you the best: a peaceful journey, its satisfactory conclusion.'

'Thank you, my friend. I hope you will find Darujhistan a worthy home.' He rose to clasp the blacksmith's hand, then moved past to embrace Chaur, who laughed in delight and tried to begin a dance with the Trell. Grimacing, Mappo stepped back. 'Goodbye, Chaur. Take care of Barathol here.'

When Chaur finally understood that he would not see Mappo again, there would be tears. There was a simple beauty to such open, child-like responses. Perhaps, Barathol considered, Chaur alone walked the truest path in life.

Settling a hand on Chaur's muscled shoulder, he smiled at Mappo. 'He is a gift I do not deserve.'

The Trell nodded. 'A gift this world does not deserve.

Now, I would be alone, in these final moments.'

Barathol bowed, then guided Chaur back to the ladder leading up to the hatch.

Iskaral Pust clambered on to his bunk, the middle of three stacked against the curving hull. He scraped his head against the underside of the top one and cursed under his breath, then cursed some more as he had to fish out a handful of disgusting offerings left beneath his pillow by the bhokarala.

Rotting fish-heads, clumps of scaly faeces, baubles stolen from Spite and a cracked kaolin pipe filched from Scillara. Flung off, they clumped and clattered on the two-plank-wide walkway at the very hoofs of his mule, which had taken to standing beside his berth at random intervals – each one proving succinctly inconvenient, as befitted a thoroughly brainless but quaintly loyal animal.

From the bunk above came a rattling snort. 'The hatch is too small, you know,' said Mogora. 'You make it too obvious, husband.'

'Maybe obvious is my middle name, did you think that? No, of course not. She never thinks at all. She has ten thousand eyes and not one of them can see past her nose-hairs. Listen well, woman. Everyone knows mules are superior to horses in every way. Including the navigation of hatches. Why, my blessed servant here prefers using outhouses over just plopping any which where along the roadside. She possesses decorum, which can hardly be said for you now, can it?'

'Shouldn't you be picking your nose or something? Your worshippers are praying for a sign, you know.'

'At least I have worshippers. You just scare 'em. You scare everybody.'

'Even you?'

'Of course not. Gods below, she terrifies me! Better not let her know, though. That would be bad. I need to do something soon. Twist off her legs, maybe! Yes, that would do it. Leave her lying on her back scratching at the air and making pathetic mewling sounds. Oh, the imagination is a wonderful thing, is it not?'

'When it's all you have.'

'When what's all I have? What idiocy are you blabbering about now? That was uncanny. Almost as if she can read my mind. Good thing she can't, though.'

'Hold on,' hissed Mogora. 'That mule was male! I'd swear it!'

'Checking him out, were you?'

'One more step on that track, husband, and I will kill you with my own hands.'

'Hee hee. What a terrible, disgusting mind you have, wife.'

'No, you won't distract me this time. Your mule has just changed sex and knowing you I might be looking at a rival, but you know what? She can have you. With my blessing she can, oh yes!'

'Popularity is a curse,' Iskaral said, stretching out with his hands behind his head and staring up at the taut ropes of the mattress above him. 'Not that she'd know anything about that. I'd better visit the local temple, assert my tyrannical dominance over all the local acolytes and fakir priests and priestesses. Priestesses! Might be a pretty one or two. As High Priest, I could have my pick as is my right. Make offerings in the shadow between her legs, yes—'

'I'd know, Iskaral Pust,' Mogora snapped, moving about on the bed above. 'I'd just know, and then I'd take my knife, one night when you're sleeping, and I'd *snick snick* and you'd be singing like a child and squatting t'piss and what woman or mule would want you then?'

'Get out of my head, woman!'

'It's not hard to know what you're thinking.'

'That's what you think! She's getting more dangerous, we need a divorce. But isn't it why most mates break up?

When the woman gets too dangerous? Must be. I'm sure of it. Well, I'd be free then, wouldn't I? Free!'

The mule brayed.

Mogora laughed so hard she wet herself, if the rank dribbles from above were any indication.

Scillara and Cutter had taken the berths closest to the stern in an effort to achieve some sort of privacy, and had rigged a section of spare canvas across the walkway. Despite this, Mogora's half-mad laughter reached through, triggering yet another scowl from Cutter.

'If those two just realized how perfect they are for each other, we'd finally get some peace.'

Scillara smiled. 'I'm sure they do. Most marriages involve mutual thoughts of murder on occasion.'

He glanced over at her. 'You've some strange ideas, Scillara. About all sorts of things.'

'I was wondering, when you head out tonight, will you want my company? Or would you rather go on your own?'

He could not hold her gaze and made a show of stretching his back before reclining on his bunk. 'Of course not,' he said. 'You'll like the Phoenix Inn. Meese, Irilta, Murillio, Coll and Kruppe. Well, maybe not Kruppe, who rubs some people the wrong way, but he's harmless enough . . . I suppose.' He rummaged in the pouch at his belt for a moment, then drew out a single coin. A Blue Moranth silver sceptre, which he began deftly working through his fingers. 'Won't they be surprised to see me.'

She managed a smile. 'Cutter's belated return.'

'Well, "Cutter" isn't the name they know me by. I was Crokus Younghand back then.'

'And where is he now? This Crokus Younghand.'

He spent a moment squinting at the coin before replying, 'Dead. Long dead.'

'And what will your friends make of that?'

He sat up, suddenly restless and still unwilling to meet her eyes. 'I don't know. They won't be happy.'

'I think I will leave you to it, Cutter,' Scillara said.

'I'll join Barathol and Chaur wandering the night markets and such – there's a fête going on, yes? That sounds inviting. As for my meeting your friends, best it wait a day or two.'

He glanced at her. 'Are you sure? You don't—'

'I'm sure,' she cut in. 'You need this night to yourself. You'll have enough questions to answer without my presence confusing things even more.'

'All right,' and despite his efforts his relief was palpable. 'But come tomorrow – everyone knows where the Phoenix is, so all you need do is ask.'

'Of course,' she replied, rising from where she sat on the edge of her own berth. 'I'd best hunt Barathol down, so he doesn't leave without me.'

'Must be nearing dusk.'

'So it is, Cutter. Lady's pull on you this night.'

'Thanks.' But it was a distracted response.

As she made her way forward, forced to shove the damned mule to one side, Scillara told herself that the hurt she was feeling was unwarranted. He'd found comfort in her arms, because there was no one else. No love was involved. Not once mentioned, not even whispered nor murmured in the thick, sleepy moments after lovemaking. Little more than mutual satisfaction, comfort and convenience. And now, well, that time had passed. Reunion with friends beckoned Cutter – that old world in which he had known his place. Difficult enough that he might no longer fit – explaining the overweight, pipe-sucking ex-whore at his side would only embarrass him.

He had changed her, she realized, pausing just inside the hatch. As if she'd absorbed some essence of his uncertainty, his lack of confidence. She no longer felt her usual brazen, bridling self. No longer ready with a sneer, no longer armoured against the vagaries of this damned world. Here, a dozen strides from the largest city she had ever seen, was neither the time nor the place for such weakness.

Well, Barathol's solid presence could answer her need. For a time, anyway.

Emerging on to the main deck, she found herself in the midst of a growing storm. The bhokarala crowded the dockside rail and scampered back and forth along its length, while at the other end of the gangplank

stood an agent of the harbour master along with a half-dozen city guards even now drawing their batons, readying to assault the ship.

Barathol and Chaur had just climbed up from the hold and the blacksmith began pushing his way through the screeching, spitting apes.

She well understood his desire to prevent an escalation of the situation. Spite was not the most evenly tempered woman Scillara had known. An argument gone awry could well result in an enraged dragon's devastating the quayside and half the city beyond. All for a misunderstanding on moorage fees.

*So much for a quiet arrival.*

Scillara hurried forward, kicking aside bhokarala and pulling loose her coin-pouch.

A blow to the side of his head and he rolled, suddenly awake, both knives coming into his hands and blades scraping across the gritty flagstoned floor beneath him. His shoulder struck a wall and he blinked in the gloom.

A tall figure stood over him, black leather and banded iron in tatters, the dull gleam of snapped ribs showing through torn, green skin. A face in shadows, pitted eyesockets, a broad slash of mouth hinting at up-thrust tusks.

Rallick Nom studied the apparition, the knives feeling useless in his gloved hands. The side of his head still rang. His gaze dropped to the stiffened leather toes of the demon's half-rotted moccasins. 'You kicked me.'

'Yes,' came the rasping reply.

'Why?'

The demon hesitated, then said, 'It seemed the thing to do.'

They were in a narrow corridor. A solid door of black wood and bronze fittings was to Rallick's left. To his right, just beyond the demon, there was a T-intersection and double doors facing on to the conjunction. The light cast by the lantern the creature held in one withered, long-fingered hand seemed both pale and cold, throwing diffused, indifferent shadows against

the stone walls. Overhead, the ceiling was roughly arched, the stones thinner and smaller towards the peak, seemingly fitted without mortar. The air smelled of dust and decay, lifeless and dry.

'It seems . . . I remember nothing,' Rallick said.

'In time.'

Every joint was stiff; even sitting up with his back against the wall left Rallick's muscles trembling. His head ached with more than just the echoes of that damned kick. 'I'm thirsty – if you're not going to beat me to death, demon, then find me something to drink.'

'I am not a demon.'

'Such things are never easy to tell,' Rallick replied in a growl.

'I am Jaghut. Raest, once a tyrant, now a prisoner. "He who rises shall fall. He who falls shall be forgotten." So said Gothos, although, alas, it seems we must all wait for ever before his name fades into oblivion.'

Some strength was returning to his limbs. 'I recall something . . . a night of blood, the Gedderone Fête. Malazans in the city . . .'

'Portentous events as bereft of meaning now as they were then. You have slept, assassin, for some time. Even the poison on your weapons has lost all potency. Although the otataral within your veins courses unabated by time – few would have done as you did, which is, I suppose, just as well.'

Rallick sheathed his knives and slowly pushed himself upright. The scene spun sickeningly and he closed his eyes until the vertigo passed.

Raest continued, 'I wander in this house . . . rarely. Perhaps some time had passed before I realized that she was missing.'

Rallick squinted at the tall, hunched Jaghut. 'She? Who?'

'A demon in truth. Vorcan is her name now, I believe.

You lay beside her, immune to the passage of time. But now she has awakened. She has, indeed, escaped. One might consider this . . . perturbing. If one cared, that is.'

Vorcan, Mistress of the Assassins' Guild, yes, now he remembered. She was wounded, dying, and he struggled to carry her, not knowing why, not knowing what he sought. To the house, the house that had grown from the very earth. The house the Malazans called an *Azath*. Born of the tyrant's Finnest – Rallick frowned at Raest. 'The house,' he said, 'it is your prison, too.'

A desiccated shrug that made bones squeak. 'The stresses of owning property.'

'So you have been here since then. Alone, not even wandering about. With two near-corpses cluttering your hallway. How long, Raest?'

'I am not the one to ask. Does the sun lift into the sky outside then collapse once more? Do bells sound to proclaim a control where none truly exists? Do mortal fools still measure the increments leading to their deaths, wagering pleasures against costs, persisting in the delusion that deeds have value, that the world and all the gods sit in judgement over every decision made or not made? Do—' 'Enough,' interrupted Rallick, straightening with only one hand against the wall. 'I asked "how long?" not "why?" or "what point?" If you don't know the answer just say so.'

'I don't know the answer. But I should correct one of your assumptions. I did not dwell in here alone, although I do so now, excepting you, of course, but your company I do not expect to last. That legion of headlong fools you call your people no doubt pine for your return. Blood awaits your daggers, your pouch thirsts for the coins that will fill it with every life you steal. And so on.'

'If you weren't alone before, Raest . . .'

'Ah, yes, I distracted myself with notions of human futility. The Master of the Deck of Dragons was, in the common language, a squatter here in the house, for a time.'

'And then?'

'He left.'

'Not a prisoner, then, this Master.'

'No. Like you, indifferent to my miserable fate. Will you now exploit your privilege, assassin?'

'What do you mean?'

'Will you now leave, never to return? Abandoning me to eternal solitude, with naught but cobwebs in my bed and bare cupboards in the kitchen, with mocking draughts and the occasional faint clatter of dead branches against shutters? And the odd scream or two as something unpleasant is devoured by earth and root in the yard. Will you simply leave me to this world, assassin?'

Rallick Nom stared at the Jaghut. 'I had no idea my unconscious presence so eased your loneliness, Raest.'

'Such insensitivity on your part should not surprise me.'

'My answer is yes, I will indeed leave you to your world.'

'You lack gratitude.'

Rallick drew his cloak round his shoulders and checked his gear. There was old blood but it simply flaked off like black snow. 'Forgive me. Thank you, Raest, for the kick in the head.'

'You are welcome. Now leave – I grow bored.'

The door opened with a loud, groaning creak. Beyond was night, yet darkness was driven back, pushed skyward, by the defiant blue fires of Darujhistan. Somewhere out of sight from where he stood at the landing, streets seethed and churned with drunken revelry. Another fête, another half-mindless celebration of survival.

The thought stirred some anticipation in Rallick Nom's soul, blowing aside the last dust of what he suspected had been a long, long sleep. Before the door behind him was closed he turned about and could just make out Raest's elongated form, still standing in the corridor. 'Why did you wake me?' he asked.

In answer, the Jaghut stepped forward and shut the door with a thunderous slam that woke birds to panic and sent them bolting into the night.

Rallick turned back to the path, saw roots writhing like serpents in the mulch to either side.

Checking his knives once more, he drew yet tighter his cloak, then set out to rediscover his city.

And so the denizens of Darujhistan grew raucous, enough to give the city itself a kind of life. Headlong indeed, with nary a thought for the future, be that the next moment or a year hence. Gas hissed into blue flame, acrobats and mummers whirled through crowds, a hundred thousand musical instruments waged war on the plains of song, and if it was said by some scholars that sound itself was undying, that it rode unending currents that struck no fatal shore, neither in space nor through time, then life itself could be measured by its cry. In the times of free, blue clarity, and in the times of gathering clouds, in the chorus of pronouncements that sang out . . . arrivals, worlds lived on, as immortal as a dream.

On the rooftop of a bastion tower, on this night, there stood a woman all in black. Eyes cold as a raptor's looked down upon the sprawl of rooftops, spark-lit chimneys in the distant slums of the Gadrobi District, and, drifting silent over all, this woman thought long and thought hard of the future.

On a street close to Coll's estate, a cloaked man paused, stood rooted like a stone whilst the fête swirled round him, and even as he concluded that a public return, such as had first occurred to him, might prove unwise, so walked another man – younger but with the same look in his hardened eyes – on his way to the Phoenix Inn.

Far in this one's wake, down at the quayside, a blacksmith, his halfwit servant, and a woman whose generous curves drew admiring glances from all sides, ambled their way towards the night markets of the Gadrobi, seeing all with the wonder and pleasure only foreigners could achieve when coming for the first time upon one of the greatest cities in the world.

Closer to the ship from which they had disembarked, a High Priest of Shadow scurried for the nearest shadows, pursued mostly unseen by spiders drifting on the lake breeze, and on the trail of both scampered a score of bhokarala – many burdened with new offerings and whatever baubles they

claimed as rightful possessions – a fang-bearing squall that flowed through crowds accompanied by shouts of surprise, terror and curses (as their collection of possessions burgeoned with every pouch, purse and jewel within reach of their clawed hands).

Aboard the ship itself, the captain remained. Now she was wearing loose, flowing robes of black and crimson silks, her face white as moonlight as she frowned at the city before her. A scent on the air, some lingering perfume redolent with memories . . . oh, of all places, but was this truly an accident? Spite did not believe in accidents.

And so she hesitated, knowing what her first step on to solid stone would reveal – perhaps, she decided, it would do to wait for a time.

Not long.

Just long enough.

In another part of Darujhistan, a merchant of iron dispatched yet another message to the Master of the Assassins' Guild, then retired to his secret library to pore once more over ancient, fraught literature. Whilst not too far away sat a merchant guard with fading barbed tattoos, frowning down at a cup of spiced, hot wine in his huge, scarred hands; and from the next room came a child's laughter, and this sound made him wince.

Down among the new estates of certain once-criminal moneylenders who had since purchased respectability, a destitute Torvald Nom stealthily approached the high, spike-topped wall of one such estate. Debts, was it? Well, fine, easily solved. Had he lost any of his skills? Of course not. If anything, such talents had been honed by the rigours of a legendary journey across half the damned world. His glorious return to Darujhistan still awaited him. Come the morning, aye, come the morning . . .

At this moment, in a small chamber above the taproom of the Phoenix Inn, a man was lying on his back on a bed, still weak from blood loss, and in his thoughts he walked the cemetery of his past, fingers brushing the tops of weathered tombstones and grave markers, seeing the knots of tangled grass climbing the sides of dusty urns, while stretching away in his wake was the shadow of his youth – fainter, longer, fraying now at the very

edges. He would not lift his hand yet to feel his own face, to feel the wrinkles and creases that wrote out in tired glyphs his age, his waning life.

Oh, flesh could be healed, yes . . .

Below, amidst a mob of bellowing, reeling drunks and screeching whores of both sexes, a small round man, seated as ever at his private table, paused with his mouth stuffed full of honeyed bread, and, upon hearing the tenth bell sound through the city, cocked his head and settled his tiny, beady eyes upon the door to the Phoenix Inn.

Arrivals.

Glory and portent, delightful reunion and terrible imminence, winged this and winged that and escapes and releases and pending clashes and nefarious demands for recompense over a single mouthful of spat wine, such a night!

Such a night!

# CHAPTER FOUR

We were drowning amidst petals and leaves
On the Plain of Sethangar
Where dreams stirred like armies on the flatland
And to sing of the beauty of all these blossoms
Was to forget the blood that fed every root
On the Plain of Sethangar
We cried out for shelter from this fecund storm
The thrust and heave of life on the scouring winds
Was dry as a priest's voice in fiery torment
On the Plain of Sethangar
And no wise words could be heard in the roar
Of the laughing flowers reaching out to the horizon
As the pungent breath left us drunk and stagger'd
On the Plain of Sethangar
Must we ever die in the riches of our profligacy
Succumbing to the earth cold and dark each time
Only to burst free wide-eyed in innocent birth
On the Plain of Sethangar?
Which god strides this field scythe in hand
To sever the grandiose mime with edged judgement
Taking from our souls all will in bundled sheaves
On the Plain of Sethangar
To feed as befits all burdensome beasts?
Flowers will worship the tree's fickle blessing of light
Forests reach into the sweetness of a sky beyond touch
Even as streams make pilgrimage to the sea
And the rain seeks union with all flesh and blood
Hills will hold fast over every plain, even Sethangar

And so we dream of inequity's end
As if it lay within our power

There in the plainness of our regard
So poorly blinded to beauty . . .

*Declamation* (fragment)
(?) Keneviss Brot
First Century Burn's Sleep

Groaning like a beast in its death-throes, the ship seemed to clamber up on to the black rocks before the keel snapped and the hull split with a splintering cry. Cut and bloodless corpses rolled and slid from the deck, spilling into the thrashing foam where pale limbs flopped and waved in the tumult before the riptide dragged them tumbling over the broken sea floor, out and down into the depths. The lone living figure, who had tied himself to the tiller, was now tangled in frayed ropes at the stern, scrabbling to reach his knife before the next huge wave exploded over the wreck. A salt-bleached hand – the skin of the palm hanging in blighted strips – tugged the broad-bladed weapon free. He slashed at the ropes binding him to the up-thrust tiller as the hull thundered to the impact of another wave and white spume cascaded over him.

As the last strand parted he fell on to his side and slid to the crushed rail, the collision driving the air from his lungs as he pitched across the encrusted rock, then sagged, limp as any corpse, into the churning water.

Another wave descended on to the wreck like an enormous fist, crushing the deck beneath its senseless power, then dragging the entire hull back into the deeper water, leaving a wake of splintered wood, lines and tattered sail.

Where the man had vanished, the in-rushing seas swirled round the black rock, and nothing emerged from that thrashing current.

In the sky overhead dark clouds clashed, spun sickly arms into a mutual embrace, and though on this coast no trees rose from the ravaged ground, and naught but wind-stripped grasses emerged from pockets here and there among the rock and gravel and sand, from the wounded sky dried, autumnal leaves skirled down like rain.

Closer to the shore heaved a stretch of water mostly sheltered from the raging seas beyond the reef. Its bottom was a sweep of coral sand, agitated enough to cloud the shallows.

The man rose into view, water streaming. He rolled his shoulders, spat out a mouthful thick with grit and blood, then waded on to the strand. He no longer carried his knife, but in his left hand was a sword in a scabbard. Made from two long strips of pale wood reinforced with blackened iron, the

scabbard revealed that it was riven through with cracks, as water drained out from a score of fissures.

Leaves raining on all sides, he walked up beyond the tide line, crunched down on to a heap of broken shells and sat, forearms on his knees, head hung down. The bizarre deluge thickened into flurries of rotting vegetation, like black sleet.

The massive beast that slammed into him would have been thrice his weight if it was not starved. Nor would it have attacked at all, ever shy of humans, but it had become lost in a dust storm, and was then driven from the grasslands leagues inland on to this barren, lifeless coast. Had any of the corpses from the ship reached the beach, the plains bear would have elected to scavenge its meal. Alas, its plague of misfortunes was unending.

Enormous jaws snapped close round the back of the man's head, canines tearing through scalp and gouging into skull, yet the man was already ducking, twisting, his sodden hair and the sudden welter of blood proving slick enough to enable him to wrest free of the bear's bite.

The sword was lying, still in its cracked scabbard, two paces away, and even as he lunged towards it the bear's enormous weight crashed down on to him. Claws raked against his chain hauberk, rings snapping away like torn scales. He half twisted round, hammering his right elbow into the side of the bear's head, hard enough to foul its second attempt to bite into the back of his neck. The blow sprayed blood from the beast's torn lip along the side of its jaw.

The man drove his elbow again, this time into the bear's right eye. A bleat of pain and the animal lunged to the left. Continuing his twist, the man drew up both legs, then drove them heels first into its ribs. Bones snapped.

Another cry of agony. Frothing blood sprayed out from its mouth.

Kicking himself away, the man reached his sword. His motions a blur of speed, he drew the weapon, alighted on his feet in a crouch, and slashed the sword into the side of the bear's neck. The ancient watermarked blade slid through thick muscle, then bit into bone, and through, bursting free on the opposite side. Blood and bile gushed as the bear's severed head thumped on

to the sand. The body sat down on its haunches, still spewing liquid, then toppled to one side, legs twitching.

Blazing heat seethed at the back of the man's head, his ears filled with a strange buzzing sound, and the braids of his black, kinked hair dripped thick threads of bloody saliva as he staggered upright.

On the sword's blade, blood boiled, turned black, then shed in flakes.

Still the sky rained dead leaves.

He staggered back down to the sea, fell on to his knees in the shallows and plunged his head into the vaguely warm water.

Numbness flowed out along the back of his skull. When he straightened once more, he saw the bloom of blood in the water, a smear stretching into some draw of current – an appalling amount. He could feel more, streaming down his back now.

He quickly tugged off the chain hauberk, then the filthy, salt-rimed shirt beneath. He tore loose the shirt's left sleeve, folded it into a broad bandanna and bound it tight round his head, as much against the torn skin and flesh as he could manage by feel.

The buzzing sound was fading. A dreadful ache filled the muscles of his neck and shoulders, and in his head there now pounded a drum, each beat pulsating until the bones of his skull seemed to reverberate. He attempted to spit again, but his parched throat yielded nothing – almost three days now without water. A juddering effect assailed his vision, as if he stood in the midst of an earthquake. Stumbling, he made his way back up the beach, collecting his sword on the way.

On to his knees once more, this time at the headless carcass. Using his sword to carve into the torso, then reaching in to grasp the bear's warm heart. He tore and cut it loose, raised it in one hand and held it over his mouth, then squeezed it as if it was a sponge. From the largest of the arteries blood gushed into his mouth.

He drank deep, finally closing his lips round the artery and sucking the last drop of blood from the organ.

When that was done he bit into the muscle and began to eat it.

Slowly, his vision steadied, and he noticed for the first time the raining leaves, the torrent only now diminishing, as the heavy, warring clouds edged away, out over the sea.

Finished eating the heart, he licked his fingers. He roughly skinned the bear and then rose once more and retrieved the scabbard, sheathing the sword. The drumbeat was fading, although pain still tormented his neck, shoulders and back – muscles and tendons that had only begun their complaint at the savage abuse they had suffered. He washed the one-sleeved shirt then wrung it – tenderly, since it was threadbare and liable to fall apart under too rigorous a ministration. Slipping it on, he then rinsed out the chain hauberk before rolling it up and settling it down over one shoulder.

Then he set out, inland.

Above the crest of the shoreline, he found before him a wasteland. Rock, scrub, drifts of ash and, in the distance, ravines and outcrops of broken bedrock, a rumpling of the landscape into chaotic folds that lifted into raw, jagged hills.

Far to his left – northward – a grainy, diffuse haze marred the sky above or beyond more hills.

He squinted, studied that haze for thirty heartbeats.

Patches of dusty blue above him now, as the storm rolled westward over the sea, its downpour of leaves trailing like claw marks in the air, staining the whitecaps beyond the reef. The wind lost some of its chill bite as the sun finally broke through, promising its own assault on mortal flesh.

The man's skin was dark, for he had been born on a savannah. His was a warrior's build, the muscles lean and sharply defined on his frame. His height was average, though something in his posture made him seem taller. His even features were ravaged by depredation, but already the rich meat of the bear's heart had begun to fill that expression with stolid, indomitable strength.

Still, the wounds blazed with ferocious heat. And he knew, then, that fever was not far off. He could see nothing nearby in which to take shelter, to hole up out of the sun. Among the ravines, perhaps, the chance of caves, overhangs. Yet . . . fifteen hundred paces away, if not more.

Could he make it that far?

He would have to.

Dying was unthinkable, and that was no exaggeration. When a man has forsaken Hood, the final gate is closed. Oblivion or the torment of a journey without end – there was no telling what fate awaited such a man.

In any case, Traveller was in no hurry to discover an answer. No, he would invite Hood to find it himself.

It was the least he could do.

Slinging the scabbard's rope-belt over his left shoulder, checking that the sword named Vengeance was snug within it, its plain grip within easy reach, he set out across the barren plain.

In his wake, stripped branches spun and twisted down from the heaving clouds, plunging into the waves, as if torn from the moon itself.

The clearing bore the unmistakable furrows of ploughs beneath the waist-high marsh grasses, each ribbon catching at their feet as they pushed through the thick stalks. The wreckage of a grain shed rose from brush at the far end, its roof collapsed with a sapling rising from the floor, as exuberant as any conqueror. Yet such signs were, thus far, all that remained of whatever tribe had once dwelt in this forest. Fragments of deliberate will gouged into the wilderness, but the will had failed. In another hundred years, Nimander knew, all evidence would be entirely erased. Was the ephemeral visage of civilization reason for fear? Or, perhaps, relief? That all victories were ultimately transitory in the face of patient nature might well be cause for optimism. No wound was too deep to heal. No outrage too horrendous to one day be irrelevant.

Nimander wondered if he had discovered the face of the one true god. Naught else but *time,* this ever changing and yet changeless tyrant against

whom no creature could win. Before whom even trees, stone and air must one day bow. There would be a last dawn, a last sunset, each kneeling in final surrender. Yes, time was indeed god, playing the same games with lowly insects as it did with mountains and the fools who would carve fastnesses into them. At peace with every scale, pleased by the rapid patter of a rat's heart and the slow sighing of devouring wind against stone. Content with a star's burgeoning light and the swift death of a raindrop on a desert floor.

'What has earned the smile, cousin?'

He glanced over at Skintick. 'Blessed with revelation, I think.'

'A miracle, then. I think that I too am converted.'

'You might want to change your mind – I do not believe my newfound god cares for worship, or answers any prayers no matter how fervent.'

'What's so unique about that?'

Nimander grunted. 'Perhaps I deserved that.'

'Oh, you are too quick to jump into the path of what might wound – even when wounding was never the intention. I am still open to tossing in with your worship of your newfound god, Nimander. Why not?'

Behind them, Desra snorted. 'I will tell you two what to worship. Power. When it is of such magnitude as to leave you free to do as you will.'

'Such freedom is ever a delusion, sister,' Skintick said.

'It is the only freedom that is *not* a delusion, fool.'

Grimacing, Nimander said, 'I don't recall Andarist being very free.'

'Because his brother was more powerful, Nimander. Anomander was free to *leave* us, was he not? Which life would you choose?'

'How about neither?' Skintick said.

Although she walked behind them, Nimander could see in his mind's eye his sister's face, and the contempt in it as she no doubt sneered at Skintick.

Clip walked somewhere ahead, visible only occasionally; whenever they strode into another half-overgrown clearing, they would see him waiting at the far end, as if impatient with lagging, wayward children.

Behind Nimander, Skintick and Desra walked the others, Nenanda electing to guard the rear as if this was some sort of raid into enemy territory. Surrounded by suspicious songbirds, nervous rodents, irritated insects, Nenanda padded along with one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, a glower for every shadow. He would be like that all day, Nimander knew, storing up his disgust and anger for when they all sat by the fire at night, a fire Nenanda deemed careless and dangerous and would only tolerate because Clip said nothing, Clip with his half-smile and spinning rings who fed Nenanda morsels of approval until the young warrior was consumed by an addict's need, desperate for the next paltry feeding.

Without it, he might crumble, collapse inward like a deflated bladder. Or lash out, yes, at every one of his kin. At Desra, who had been his lover. At Kedeviss and Aranatha who were useless. At Skintick who mocked to hide his cowardice. And at Nimander, who was to blame for – well, no need to go into that, was there?

*'Do not fret, beloved. I wait for you. For ever. Be strong and know this: you are stronger than you know. Think—'*

And all at once another voice sounded in his mind, harder, sour with venom, *'She knows nothing. She lies to you.'*

Phaed.

*'Yes, you cannot be rid of me, brother. Not when your hands still burn. Still feel the heat of my throat. Not when my bulging eyes stay fixed on you, like nails, yes? The iron tips slowly pushing into your own eyes, so cold, such pain, and you cannot pull loose, can never escape.'*

Do I deny my guilt? Do I even flinch from such truths?

*'That is not courage, brother. That is despair. Pathetic surrender. Remember Withal? How he took upon himself what needed doing? He picked me up like a rag doll – impressive strength, yes! The memory heats*

*me, Nimander! Would you lick my lips?'* and she laughed. *'Withal, yes, he knew what to do, because you left him no choice. Because you failed. So weak you could not murder your sister. I saw as much in your eyes; at that last moment, I saw it!'*

Some sound must have risen from Nimander, for Skintick turned with brows raised.

'What is wrong?'

Nimander shook his head.

They walked round pale-barked trees, on soft loam between splayed roots. Dappled sunlight and the chattering alarm of a flying squirrel on a bony branch overhead. Leaves making voices – yes, that was all it was, whispering leaves and his overwrought imagination—

Phaed snorted. *'"Sometimes being bad feels good. Sometimes dark lust burns like parched wood. Sometimes, my love, you awaken desire in someone else's pain." Recall that poet, Nimander? That woman of Kharkanas? Andarist was reluctant to speak of her, but I found in the Old Scrolls all her writings. "And with the tips of your fingers, all this you can train." Hah! She knew! And they all feared her, and now they will not speak her name, a name forbidden, but I know it – shall I—'*

No!

And Nimander's hands clutched, as if once more crushing Phaed's throat. And he saw her eyes, yes, round and swollen huge and ready to burst. In his mind, yes, once more he choked the life from her.

And from the leaves came the whisper of dark pleasure.

Suddenly cold, suddenly terrified, he heard Phaed's knowing laugh.

'You look ill,' Skintick said. 'Should we halt for a rest?'

Nimander shook his head. 'No, let Clip's impatience drag us ever onward, Skintick. The sooner we are done . . .' But he could not go on, would not finish that thought.

'See ahead,' Desra said. 'Clip has reached the forest edge, and not a moment too soon.'

There was no cause for her impatience, merely a distorted, murky reflection of Clip's own. This was how she seduced men, by giving back to them versions of themselves, promising her protean self like a precious gift to feed their narcissistic pleasures. She seemed able to steal hearts almost without effort, but Nimander suspected that Clip's self-obsession would prove too powerful, too well armoured against any incursions. He would not let her into his places of weakness. No, he would simply use her, as she had so often used men, and from this would be born a most deadly venom.

Nimander had no thought to warn Clip. Leave them their games, and all the wounds to come.

*'Yes, leave them to it, brother. We have our own, after all.'*

Must I choke you silent once more, Phaed?

*'If it pleases you.'*

The clearing ahead stretched out, rolling downward towards a distant river or stream. The fields on the opposite bank had been planted with rows of some strange, purplish, broad-leafed crop. Scarecrows hung from crosses in such profusion that it seemed they stood like a cohort of soldiers in ranks. Motionless, rag-bound figures in each row, only a few paces apart. The effect was chilling.

Clip's eyes thinned as he studied the distant field and its tattered sentinels. Chain snapped out, rings spun in a gleaming blur.

'There's a track, I think,' Skintick said, 'up and over the far side.'

'What plants are those?' Aranatha asked.

No one had an answer.

'Why are there so many scarecrows?'

Again, no suggestions were forthcoming.

Clip once more in the lead, they set out.

The water of the stream was dark green, almost black, so sickly in appearance that none stopped for a drink, and each found stones to step on rather than simply splash across the shallow span. They ascended towards the field where clouds of insects hovered round the centre stalk of each plant, swarming the pale green flowers before rising in a gust to plunge down on to the next.

As they drew closer, their steps slowed. Even Clip finally halted.

The scarecrows had once been living people. The rags were bound tightly, covering the entire bodies; arms, legs, necks, faces, all swathed in rough cloth that seemed to drip black fluids, soaking the earth. As the wrapped heads were forward slung, threads of the thick dark substance stretched down from the gauze covering the victims' noses.

'Feeding the plants, I think,' Skintick said quietly.

'Blood?' Nimander asked.

'Doesn't look like blood, although there may be blood in it.'

'Then they're still alive.'

Yet that seemed unlikely. None of the forms moved, none lifted a bound head at the sound of their voices. The air itself stank of death.

'They are not still alive,' Clip said. He had stopped spinning the chain.

'Then what leaks from them?'

Clip moved on to the narrow track running up through the field. Nimander forced himself to follow, and heard the others fall in behind him. Once they were in the field, surrounded by the corpses and the man-high plants, the pungent air was suddenly thick with the tiny, wrinkle-winged insects, slithering wet and cool against their faces.

They hurried forward, gagging, coughing.

The furrows were sodden underfoot, black mud clinging to their moccasins, a growing weight that made them stumble and slip as they scrambled upslope. Reaching the ridge at last, out from the rows, down into

a ditch and then on to a road. Beyond it, more fields to either side of a track, and, rising from them like an army, more corpses. A thousand hung heads, a ceaseless flow of black tears.

'Mother bless us,' Kedeviss whispered, 'who could do such a thing?'

'"All possible cruelties are inevitable",' Nimander said. '"Every conceivable crime has been committed".' Quoting Andarist yet again.

'Try thinking your own thoughts on occasion,' Desra said drily.

'He saw truly—'

'Andarist surrendered his soul and thought it earned him wisdom,' Clip cut in, punctuating his statement with a snap of rings. 'In this case, though, he probably struck true. Even so, this has the flavour of . . . necessity.'

Skintick snorted. 'Necessity, now there's a word to feed every outrage on decency.'

Beyond the ghastly army and the ghoulish purple-leaved plants squatted a town, quaint and idyllic against a backdrop of low, forested hills. Smoke rose above thatched roofs. A few figures were visible on the high street.

'I think we should avoid meeting anyone,' Nimander said. 'I do not relish the notion of ending up staked above a plant.'

'That will not occur,' said Clip. 'We need supplies and we can pay for them. In any case, we have already been seen. Come, with luck there will be a hostel or inn.'

A man in a burgundy robe was approaching, up the track that met the raised road. Below the tattered hem of the robe his legs were bare and pale, but his feet were stained black. Long grey hair floated out from his head, unkempt and tangled. His hands were almost comically oversized, and these too were dyed black.

The face was lined, the pale blue eyes wide as they took in the Tiste Andii on the road. Hands waving, he began shouting, in a language Nimander had never heard before. After a moment, he clearly cursed, then said in broken

Andii, 'Traders of Black Coral ever welcome! Morsko town happy of guests and kin of Son of Darkness! Come!' Clip gestured for his troupe to follow.

The robed man, still smiling like a crazed fool, whirled and hurried back down the track.

Townsfolk were gathering on the high street, watching in silence as they drew nearer. The score or so parted when they reached the edge of the town. Nimander saw in their faces a bleak lifelessness, in their eyes the wastelands of scorched souls, so exposed, so unguarded, that he had to look away.

Hands and feet were stained, and on more than a few the blackness rimmed their gaping mouths, making the hole in their faces too large, too seemingly empty and far too depthless.

The robed man was talking. 'A new age, traders. Wealth! Bastion. Heath. Even Outlook rises from ash and bones. Saemankelyk, glory of the Dying God. Many the sacrifices. Of the willing, oh yes, the willing. And such thirst!'

They came to a broad square with a bricked well on a centre platform of water-worn limestone slabs. On all sides stood racks from which harvested plants hung drying upside down, their skull-sized rootballs lined like rows of children's heads, faces deformed by the sun. Old women were at the well, drawing water in a chain that wended between racks to a low, squat temple, empty buckets returning.

The robed man pointed at the temple – probably the only stone building in the town – and said, 'Once sanctified in name of Pannion. No more! The Dying God now, whose body, yes, lies in Bastion. I have looked upon it. Into its eyes. Will you taste the Dying God's tears, my friends? Such demand!'

'What horrid nightmare rules here?' Skintick asked in a whisper.

Nimander shook his head.

'Tell me, do we look like traders?'

'How should I know?'

'Black Coral, Nimander. Son of Darkness – our kinfolk have become merchants!'

'Yes, but merchants of what?'

The robed man – a priest of some sort – now led them to an inn to the left of the temple that looked half dilapidated. 'Few traders this far east, you see. But roof is sound. I will send for maids, cook. There is tavern. Opens of midnight.'

The ground floor of the inn was layered in dust, the planks underfoot creaking and strewn with pellets of mouse droppings. The priest stood beside the front door, large hands entwined, head bobbing as he held his smile.

Clip faced the man. 'This will do,' he said. 'No need for maids, but find a cook.'

'Yes, a cook. Come midnight to tavern!'

'Very well.'

The priest left.

Nenanda began pacing, kicking detritus away from his path. 'I do not like this, Herald. There aren't enough people for this town – you must have seen that.'

'Enough,' muttered Skintick as he set his pack down on a dusty tabletop, 'for planting and harvesting.'

'Saemankelyk,' said Nimander. 'Is that the name of this dying god?'

'I would like to see it,' Clip said, chain spinning once more as he looked out through the smeared lead-paned window. 'This dying god.'

'Is this place called Bastion on the way to Black Coral?'

Clip glanced across at Nimander, disdain heavy in his eyes. 'I said I wish to see this dying god. That is enough.'

'I thought—' began Nenanda, but Clip turned on him sharply.

'That is your mistake, warrior. Thinking. There is time. There is always time.'

Nimander glanced across at Skintick. His cousin shrugged; then, eyes narrowing, he suddenly smiled.

'Your god, Nimander?'

'Yes.'

'Not likely to die any time soon, then.'

'No, never that.'

'What are you two talking about?' Clip demanded, then, dismissing any possible reply, he faced the window once more. 'A dying god needs to die sometime.'

'Notions of mercy, Great One?' Skintick asked.

'Not where you are concerned.'

'Just as well, since I could never suffer the gratitude.'

Nimander watched as Desra glided up to stand beside Clip. They stood looking out through the pane, like husband and wife, like allies against the world. Her left arm almost touching him, up near her elbow, but she would not draw any closer. The spinning rings prevented that, whirling a metal barrier.

'Tonight,' Clip said loudly, 'no one drinks.'

Nimander thought back to those black-stained mouths and the ravaged eyes above them, and he shivered.

Mist drifted down from the park-like forest north of the Great Barrow, merging with the smoke of cookfires from the pilgrims encamped like an army around the enormous, circular mound. Dawn was paling the sky, seeming to push against the unnatural darkness to the south, but this was a war the sun could not win.

From the city gate the cobbled road ran between lesser barrows where hundreds of corpses had been interred following the conquest. Malazans, Grey Swords, Rhivi, Tiste Andii and K'Chain Che'Malle. Farther to the west rose longer barrows, final home to the fallen citizens and soldiers of the city.

Seerdomin walked the road through the gloom. A path through ghosts – too many to even comprehend – but he thought he could hear the echoes of their death-cries, their voices of pain, their desperate pleas for mothers and loved ones. Once he was past this place, who was there to hear those echoes? No one, and it was this truth that struck him the hardest. They would entwine with naught but themselves, falling unheeded to the dew-flattened grass.

He emerged into morning light, like passing through a curtain, suddenly brushed with warmth, and made his way up the slope towards the sprawled encampment. For this, he wore his old uniform, a kind of penance, a kind of self-flagellation. There was need, in his mind, to bear his guilt openly, brazenly, to leave himself undefended and indefensible. This was how he saw his daily pilgrimage to the Great Barrow, although he well knew that some things could never be purged, and that redemption was a dream of the deluded.

Eyes fixed on him from the camps to either side as he continued on towards that massive heap of treasure – wealth of such measure that it could only belong to a dead man, who could not cast covetous eyes upon his hoard, who would not feel its immense weight night and day, who would not suffer beneath its terrible curse. He was tracked, then, by no doubt hardening eyes, the fixation of hatred, contempt, perhaps even the desire of murder. No matter. He understood such sentiments, the purity of such desires.

Armour clanking, chain rustling across the fronts of his thighs as he drew ever closer.

The greater vastness of wealth now lay buried beneath more mundane trinkets, yet it was these meagre offerings that seemed most potent in their significance to Seerdomin. Their comparative value was so much greater,

after all. Sacrifice must be weighed by the pain of what is surrendered, and this alone was the true measure of a virtue's worth.

He saw now the glitter of sunlight in the dew clinging to copper coins, the slick glimmer on sea-polished stones in an array of muted colours and patterns. The fragments of glazed ceramics from some past golden age of high culture.

Feathers now bedraggled, knotted strips of leather from which dangled fetishes, gourd rattles to bless newborn babes and sick children. And now, here and there, the picked-clean skulls of the recent dead – a sub-cult, he had learned, centred on the T'lan Imass, who knelt before the Redeemer and so made themselves his immortal servants.

Seerdomin knew that the truth was more profound than that, more breathtaking, and that servitude was not a vow T'lan Imass could make, not to anyone but the woman known as Silverfox. No, they had knelt in *gratitude*.

That notion could still leave him chilled, wonder awakened in his heart like a gust of surprised breath.

Still, these staring skulls seemed almost profane.

He stepped into the slightly rutted avenue and drew closer. Other pilgrims were placing their offerings ahead, then turning about and making their way back, edging round him with furtive glances. Seerdomin heard more in his wake, a susurration of whispered prayers and low chanting that seemed like a gentle wave carrying him forward.

Reaching the barrow's ragged, cluttered edge, he moved to one side, off the main approach, then settled down into a kneeling position before the shrine, lowering his head and closing his eyes.

He heard someone move up alongside him, heard the soft breathing but nothing else.

Seerdomin prayed in silence. The same prayer, every day, every time, always the same.

*Redeemer. I do not seek your blessing. Redemption will never be mine, nor should it, not by your touch, nor that of anyone else. Redeemer, I bring no gift to set upon your barrow. I bring to you naught but myself. Worshippers and pilgrims will hear nothing of your loneliness. They armour you against all that is human, for that is how they make you into a god. But you were once a mortal soul. And so I come, my only gift my company. It is paltry, I know, but it is all I have and all I would offer.*

*Redeemer, bless these pilgrims around me.*

*Bless them with peace in their need.*

He opened his eyes, then slowly climbed to his feet.

Beside him spoke a woman. 'Benighted.'

He started, but did not face her. 'I have no such title,' he said.

There was faint amusement in her reply, 'Seerdomin, then. We speak of you often, at night, from fire to fire.'

'I do not flee your venom, and should it one day take my life, so it will be.'

All humour vanished from her voice as she seemed to draw a gasp, then said, 'We speak of you, yes, but not with venom. Redeemer bless us, not that.'

Bemused, he finally glanced her way. Was surprised to see a young, unlined face – the voice had seemed older, deep of timbre, almost husky – framed in glistening black hair, chopped short and angled downward to her shoulders. Her large eyes were of darkest brown, the outer corners creased in lines that did not belong to one of her few years. She wore a woollen robe of russet in which green strands threaded down, but the robe hung open, unbelted, revealing a pale green linen blouse cut short enough to expose a faintly bulging belly. From her undersized breasts he judged that she was not with child, simply not yet past the rounded softness of adolescence.

She met his eyes in a shy manner that once again startled him. 'We call you the Benighted, out of respect. And all who arrive are told of you, and by this means we ensure that there is no theft, no rape, no crime at all. The Redeemer has chosen you to guard his children.'

'That is untrue.'

'Perhaps.'

'I had heard that no harm befell the pilgrims this close to the Great Barrow.'

'Now you know why.'

Seerdomin was dumbfounded. He could think of nothing to say to such a notion. It was madness. It was, yes, *unfair.* 'Is it not the Redeemer who shows us,' said the woman, 'that burdens are the lot of us all? That we must embrace such demands upon our souls, yet stand fearless, open and welcoming?'

'I do not know what the Redeemer shows – to anyone.' His tone was harsher than he'd intended. 'I have enough burdens of my own. I will not accept yours – I will not be responsible for your safety, or that of any other pilgrim. This – this . . .' *This is not why I am here!* Yet, much as he wanted to shout that out loud, instead he turned away, marched back to the avenue.

Pilgrims flinched from his path, deepening his anger.

Through the camp, eyes set on the darkness ahead, wanting to be once more within its chill embrace, and the city, too. The damp grey walls, the gritty cobbles of the streets, the musty cave of a tavern with its surround of pale, miserable faces – yes, back to his own world. Where nothing was asked of him, nothing demanded, not a single expectation beyond that of sitting at a table with the game arrayed before him, the twist and dance of a pointless contest.

On to the road, into the swirl of lost voices from countless useless ghosts, his boots ringing on the stones.

*Damned fools!*

Down at the causeway spanning the Citadel's moat, blood leaked out from bodies sprawled along its length, and in the north sky something terrible was happening. Lurid slashes like a rainbow gone mad, spreading in waves that devoured darkness. Was it pain that strangled the very air? Was it something else burgeoning to life, shattering the universe itself?

Endest Silann, a simple acolyte in the Temple of Mother Dark, wove drunkenly round the bodies towards the Outer Gate, skidding on pools of gore. Through the gate's peaked arch he could see the city, the roofs like the gears of countless mechanisms, gears that could lock with the sky itself, with all creation. Such was Kharkanas, First Born of all cities. But the sky had changed. The perfect machine of existence was broken – *see the sky!*

The city trembled, the roofs now ragged-edged. A wind had begun to howl, the voice of the multihued light-storm as it lashed out, flared with thunderous fire.

*Forsaken. We are forsaken!*

He reached the gate, fell against one pillar and clawed at the tears streaming from his eyes. The High Priestess, cruel poet, was shrieking in the nave of the Temple, shrieking like a woman being raped. Others – women all – were writhing on the marble floor, convulsing in unison, a prostrate dance of macabre sensuality. The priests and male acolytes had sought to still the thrashing limbs, to ease the ravaged cries erupting from tortured throats with empty assurances, but then, one by one, they began to recoil as the tiles grew slick beneath the women, the so-called Nectar of Ecstasy – and no, no man could now pretend otherwise, could not but see this the way it was, the truth of it.

They fled. Crazed with horror, yes, but driven away by something else, and was it not *envy*? Civil war had ignited, deadly as that storm in the sky. Families were being torn asunder, from the Citadel itself down to the meanest homes of the commonry. Andii blood painted Kharkanas and there was nowhere to run.

Through the gate, and then, even as despair choked all life from Endest Silann, he saw *him* approaching. From the city below. His forearms

sheathed in black glistening scales, his bared chest made a thing of natural armour. The blood of Tiam ran riot through him, fired to life by the conflation of chaotic sorcery, and his eyes glowed with ferocious will.

Endest fell to his knees in Anomander's path. 'Lord! The world falls!'

'Rise, priest,' he replied. 'The world does not fall. It but *changes*. I need you. Come.'

And so he walked past, and Endest found himself on his feet, as Lord Anomander's will closed about his heart like an iron gauntlet, pulling him round and into the great warrior's wake.

He wiped at his eyes. 'Lord, where are we going?'

'The Temple.'

'We cannot! They have gone mad – the women! They are—'

'I know what assails them, priest.'

'The High Priestess—'

'Is of no interest to me.' Anomander paused, glanced back at him. 'Tell me your name.'

'Endest Silann, Third Level Acolyte. Lord, please—'

But the warrior continued on, silencing Endest with a gesture from one scaled, taloned hand. 'The crime of this day, Endest Silann, rests with Mother Dark herself.'

And then, at that precise moment, the young acolyte understood what the Lord intended. And yes, Anomander would indeed need him. His very soul – *Mother forgive me* – to open the way, to lead the Lord on to the Unseen Road.

*And he will stand before her, yes. Tall, unyielding, a son who is not afraid. Not of her. Not of his own anger. The storm, oh, the storm is just beginning.*

Endest Silann sat alone in his room, the bare stone walls as solid and cold as those of a tomb. A small oil lamp sat on the lone table, testament to his

failing eyes, to the stain of Light upon his soul, a stain so old now, so deeply embedded in the scar tissue of his heart, that it felt like tough leather within him.

Being old, it was his privilege to relive ancient memories, to resurrect in his flesh and his bones the recollection of youth – the time before the aches seeped into joints, before brittle truths weakened his frame to leave him bent and tottering.

*'Hold the way open, Endest Silann. She will rage against you. She will seek to drive me away, to close herself to me. Hold. Do not relent.'*

*'But Lord, I have sworn my life to her.'*

*'What value is that if she will not be held to account for her deeds?'*

*'She is the creator of us all, Lord!'*

*'Yes, and she will answer for it.'*

Youth was a time for harsh judgement. Such fires ebbed with age. Certainty itself withered. Dreams of salvation died on the vine and who could challenge that blighted truth? They had walked through a citadel peopled by the dead, the broken open, the spilled out. Like the violent opening of bodies, the tensions, rivalries and feuds could no longer be contained. Chaos delivered in a raw and bloody birth, and now the child squatted amidst its mangled playthings, with eyes that burned.

The fool fell into line. The fool always did. The fool followed the first who called. The fool gave away – with cowardly relief – all rights to think, to choose, to find his own path. And so Endest Silann walked the crimson corridors, the stench-filled hallways, there but two strides behind Anomander.

*'Will you do as I ask, Endest Silann?'*

*'Yes, Lord.'*

*'Will you hold?'*

*'I shall hold.'*

*'Will you await me the day?'*

*'Which day, Lord?'*

*'The day at the very end, Endest Silann. Will you await me on that day?'*

*'I said I would hold, Lord, and so I shall.'*

*'Hold, old friend, until then. Until then. Until the moment when you must betray me. No – no protestations, Endest. You will know the time, you will know it and know it well.'*

It was what kept him alive, he suspected. This fraught waiting, so long all was encrusted, stiff and made almost shapeless by the accretion of centuries.

*'Tell me, Endest, what stirs in the Great Barrow?'*

*'Lord?'*

*'Is it Itkovian? Do we witness in truth the birth of a new god?'*

*'I do not know, Lord. I am closed to such things.' As I have been since that day in the Temple.*

*'Ah, yes, I had forgotten. I apologize, old friend. Mayhap I will speak to Spinnock, then. Certain quiet enquiries, perhaps.'*

*'He will serve you as always, Lord.'*

*'Yes, one of my burdens.'*

*'Lord, you bear them well.'*

*'Endest, you lie poorly.'*

*'Yes, Lord.'*

*'Spinnock it shall be, then. When you leave, please send for him – not with haste, when he has the time.'*

*'Lord, expect him at once.'*

And so Anomander sighed, because no other response was possible, was it? *And I, too, am your burden, Lord. But we best not speak of that.*

*See me, Lord, see how I still wait.*

Incandescent light was spilling from the half-open doors of the temple, rolling in waves out over the concourse like the wash of a flood, sufficient in strength to shift corpses about, milky eyes staring as the heads pitched and lolled.

As they set out across the expanse, that light flowed up round their shins, startlingly cold. Endest Silann recognized the nearest dead Andii. Priests who had lingered too long, caught in the conflagration that Endest had felt but not seen as he rushed through the Citadel's corridors. Among them, followers from various factions. Silchas Ruin's. Andarist's, and Anomander's own. Drethdenan's, Hish Tulla's, Vanut Degalla's – oh, there had been waves of fighting on this concourse, these sanctified flagstones.

*In birth there shall be blood. In death there shall be light.* Yes, this was the day for both birth and death, for both blood and light.

They drew closer to the doors of the temple, slowed to observe the waves of light tumbling down the broad steps. Their hue had deepened, as if smeared with old blood, but the power was waning. Yet Endest Silann sensed a presence within, something contained, someone waiting.

*For us.*

The High Priestess? No. Of her, the acolyte sensed nothing.

Anomander took his first step on to the stone stairs.

And was held there, as *her* voice filled them.

*No. Be warned, Anomander, dear son, from Andii blood is born a new world. Understand me. You and your kin are no longer alone, no longer free to play your vicious games. There are now . . . others.*

Anomander spoke. 'Mother, did you imagine I would be surprised? Horrified? It could never be enough, to be naught but a mother, to create

with hands closed upon no one. To yield so much of yourself, only to find us your only reward – us slayers, us betrayers.'

*There is new blood within you.*

'Yes.'

*My son, what have you done?*

'Like you, Mother, I have chosen to embrace change.

Yes, there are others now. I sense them. There will be wars between us, and so I shall unite the Andii. Resistance is ending. Andarist, Drethdenan, Vanut Degalla. Silchas is fleeing, and so too Hish Tulla and Manalle. Civil strife is now over, Mother.'

*You have killed Tiam. My son, do you realize what you have begun? Silchas flees, yes, and where do you think he goes? And the newborn, the others, what scent will draw them now, what taste of chaotic power? Anomander, in murder you seek peace, and now the blood flows and there shall be no peace, not ever again.*

*I forsake you, Anomander Blood of Tiam. I deny my first children all. You shall wander the realms, bereft of purpose. Your deeds shall avail you nothing. Your lives shall spawn death unending. The Dark – my heart – is closed to you, to you all.*

And, as Anomander stood unmoving, Endest Silann cried out behind him, falling to his knees in bruising collapse. A hand of power reached into him, tore something loose, then was gone – something, yes, that he would one day call by its name: *Hope.*

He sat staring at the flickering flame of the lamp.

Wondering what it was, that loyalty should so simply take the place of despair, as if to set such despair upon another, a chosen leader, was to absolve oneself of all that might cause pain. Loyalty, aye, the exchange that was surrender in both directions. From one, all will, from the other, all freedom.

From one, all will.

From the other . . .

*

The sword, an arm's length of copper-hued iron, had been forged in Darkness, in Kharkanas itself. Sole heirloom of House Durav, the weapon had known three wielders since the day of quenching at the Hust Forge, but of those kin who held the weapon before Spinnock Durav, nothing remained – no ill-fitting, worn ridges in the horn grip, no added twists of wire at the neck of the pommel adjusting weight or balance; no quirk of honing on the edges. The sword seemed to have been made, by a master weaponsmith, specifically for Spinnock, for his every habit, his every peculiarity of style and preference.

So in his kin, therefore, he saw versions of himself, and like the weapon he was but one in a continuum, unchanging, even as he knew that he would be the last. And that one day, perhaps not far off, some stranger would bend down and tug the sword from senseless fingers, would lift it for a closer examination. The water-etched blade, the almost-crimson edges with the back-edge sharply angled and the down-edge more tapering. Would squint, then, and see the faint glyphs nested in the ferule along the entire blade's length. And might wonder at the foreign marks. Or not.

The weapon would be kept, as a trophy, as booty to sell in some smoky market, or it would rest once more in a scabbard at the hip or slung from a baldric, resuming its purpose which was to take life, to spill blood, to tear the breath from mortal souls. And generations of wielders might curse the ill-fitting horn grip, the strange ridges of wear and the once-perfect honing that no local smith could match.

Inconceivable, for Spinnock, was the image of the sword lying lost, woven out of sight by grasses, the iron's sheath of oil fading and dull with dust, and then the rust blotting the blade like open sores; until, like the nearby mouldering, rotting bones of its last wielder, the sword sank into the ground, crumbling, decaying into a black, encrusted and shapeless mass.

Seated on his bed with the weapon across his thighs, Spinnock Durav rubbed the last of the oil into the iron, watched the glyphs glisten as if alive,

as ancient, minor sorcery awakened, armouring the blade against corrosion. Old magic, slowly losing its efficacy. *Just like me.* Smiling, he rose and slid the sword into the scabbard, then hung the leather baldric on a hook by the door.

'Clothes do you no justice, Spin.'

He turned, eyed the sleek woman sprawled atop the blanket, her arms out to the sides, her legs still spread wide. 'You're back.'

She grunted. 'Such arrogance. My temporary . . . absence had nothing to do with you, as you well know.'

'Nothing?'

'Well, little, then. You know I walk in Darkness, and when it takes me, I travel far indeed.'

He eyed her for a half-dozen heartbeats. 'More often of late,' he said.

'Yes.' The High Priestess sat up, wincing at some pain in her lower back and rubbing at the spot. 'Do you remember, Spin, how all of this was so easy, once? Our young bodies seemed made for just that one thing, beauty woven round a knot of need. How we displayed our readiness, how we preened, like the flowers of carnivorous plants? How it made each of us, to ourselves, the most important thing in the world, such was the seduction of that knot of need, seducing first ourselves and then others, so many others —'

'Speak for yourself,' Spinnock said, laughing, even as her words prodded something deep inside him, a hint of pain there was no point paying attention to, or so he told himself, still holding his easy smile as he drew closer to the bed. 'Those journeys into Kurald Galain were denied you for so long, until the rituals of opening seemed devoid of purpose. Beyond the raw pleasure of sex.'

She studied him a moment from beneath heavy lids. 'Yes.'

'Has she forgiven us, then?'

Her laugh was bitter. 'You ask it so plain, as if enquiring after a miffed relative! How can you do such things, Spin? It should have taken you half the night to broach that question.'

'Perhaps age has made me impatient.'

'After the torture you just put me through? You have the patience of lichen.'

'But rather more interesting, I hope.'

She moved to the edge of the bed, set her bare feet on the floor and hissed at the stone's chill. 'Where are my clothes?'

'They burned to ash in the heat of your desire.'

'There – bring them over, if you please.'

'Now who is impatient?' But he collected up her priestly robes.

'The visions are growing more . . . fraught.'

Nodding, he held out her robe.

She rose, turned round and slipped her arms into the sleeves, then settled back into his embrace. 'Thank you, Spinnock Durav, for acceding to my . . . need.'

'The ritual cannot be denied,' he replied, stroking her cut-short, midnight-black hair. 'Besides, did you think I would refuse such a request from you?'

'I grow tired of the priests. Their ennui is such that most of them must imbibe foul herbs to awaken them to life. More often, of late, we have them simply service us, while they lie there, limp as rotting bananas.'

He laughed, stepping away to find his own clothes. 'Bananas, yes, a most wondrous fruit to reward us in this strange world. That and kelyk. In any case, the image you describe is unfairly unappetizing.'

'I agree, and so, thank you again, Spinnock Durav.'

'No more gratitude, please. Unless you would have me voice my own and so overwhelm you with the pathos of my plight.'

To that, she but smiled. 'Stay naked, Spin, until I leave.'

'Another part of the ritual?' he asked.

'Would I have so humbly asked if it was?'

When she was gone, Spinnock Durav drew on his clothing once more, thinking back to his own ritual, servicing his sword with a lover's touch, as if to remind the weapon that the woman he had just made love to was but a diversion, a temporary distraction, and that there was place for but one love in his heart, as befitted a warrior.

True, an absurd ritual, a conceit that was indeed pathetic. But with so little to hold on to, well, Tiste Andii clung tight and fierce to anything with meaning, no matter how dubious or ultimately nonsensical.

Dressed once more, he set out.

The game awaited him. The haunted gaze of Seerdomin, there across from him, with artfully carved but essentially inert lumps of wood, antler and bone on the table between them. Ghostly, irrelevant players to each side.

And when it was done, when victory and defeat had been played out, they would sit for a time, drinking from the pitcher, and Seerdomin might again speak of something without quite saying what it was, might slide round what bothered him with every word, with every ambiguous comment and observation. And all Spinnock would glean was that it had something to do with the Great Barrow north of Black Coral. With his recent refusal to journey out there, ending his own pilgrimage, leaving Spinnock to wonder at the man's crisis of faith, to dread the arrival of true despair, when all that Spinnock needed from his friend might wither, even die.

And where then would he find hope?

He walked the gloomy streets, closing in on the tavern, and wondered if there was something he could do for Seerdomin. The thought slowed his steps and made him alter his course. Down an alley, out on to another street, this one the side of a modest hill, with the buildings stepping down level by

level on each side, a cascade of once brightly painted doors – but who bothered with such things now in this eternal Night?

He came to one door on his left, its flaked surface gouged with a rough sigil, the outline of the Great Barrow in profile, beneath it the ragged imprint of an open hand.

Where worship was born, priests and priestesses appeared with the spontaneity of mould on bread.

Spinnock pounded on the door.

After a moment it opened a crack and he looked down to see a single eye peering up at him.

'I would speak to her,' he said.

The door creaked back. A young girl in a threadbare tunic stood in the narrow hallway, now curtseying repeatedly. 'L-lord,' she stammered, 'she is up the stairs – it is late—'

'Is it? And I am not a "lord". Is she awake?'

A hesitant nod.

'I will not take much of her time. Tell her it is the Tiste Andii warrior she once met in the ruins. She was collecting wood. I was . . . doing very little. Go, I will wait.'

Up the stairs the girl raced, two steps at a time, the dirty soles of her feet flashing with each upward leap.

He heard a door open, close, then open again, and the girl reappeared at the top of the stairs. 'Come!' she hissed.

The wood creaked beneath him as he climbed to the next level.

The priestess – ancient, immensely obese – had positioned herself on a once plush chair before an altar of heaped trinkets. Braziers bled orange light to either side, shedding tendrils of smoke that hung thick and acrid beneath the ceiling. The old woman's eyes reflected that muted glow, murky with cataracts.

As soon as Spinnock entered the small room, the girl left, closing the door behind her.

'You do not come,' said the priestess, 'to embrace the new faith, Spinnock Durav.'

'I don't recall ever giving you my name, Priestess.'

'We all know the one who alone among all the Tiste Andii consorts with us lowly humans. Beyond the old one who bargains for goods in the markets and you are not Endest Silann, who would have struggled on the stairs, and bowed each one near to breaking with his weight.'

'Notoriety makes me uneasy.'

'Of course it does. What do you want with me, warrior?'

'I would ask you something. Is there a crisis among the faithful?'

'Ah. You speak of Seerdomin, who now denies us in our need.'

'He does? How? What need?'

'It is not your concern. Not that of the Tiste Andii, nor the Son of Darkness.'

'Anomander Rake rules Black Coral, Priestess, and we Tiste Andii serve him.'

'The Great Barrow lies outside Night. The Redeemer does not kneel before the Son of Darkness.'

'I am worried for my friend, Priestess. That is all.'

'You cannot help him. Nor, it is now clear, can he help us.'

'Why do you need help?'

'We await the Redeemer, to end that which afflicts his followers.'

'And how will the Redeemer achieve such a thing, except through chosen mortals?'

She cocked her head, as if startled by his question, then she smiled. 'Ask that question of your friend, Spinnock Durav. When the game is done and your Lord is victorious yet again, and you call out for beer, and the two of you – so much more alike than you might imagine – drink and take ease in each other's company.'

'Your knowledge dismays me.'

'The Redeemer is not afraid of the Dark.'

Spinnock started, his eyes widening. 'Embracing the grief of the T'lan Imass is one thing, Priestess. That of the Tiste Andii – no, there may be no fear in the Redeemer, but his soul had best awaken to wisdom. Priestess, make this plain in your prayers. The Tiste Andii are not for the Redeemer. God or no, such an embrace will destroy him. Utterly.' *And, by Mother's own breath, it would destroy us as well.*

'Seerdomin awaits you,' she said, 'and wonders, since you are ever punctual.'

Spinnock Durav hesitated, then nodded. Hoping that this woman's god had more wisdom than she did; hoping, too, that the power of prayer could not bend the Redeemer into ill-conceived desires to reach too far, to seek what could only destroy him, all in that fervent fever of gushing generosity so common to new believers.

'Priestess, your claim that the Great Barrow lies beyond my Lord's responsibilities is in error. If the pilgrims are in need, the Son of Darkness will give answer—'

'And so lay claim to what is not his.'

'You do not know Anomander Rake.'

'We need nothing from your Lord.'

'Then perhaps I can help.'

'No. Leave now, Tiste Andii.'

Well, he had tried, hadn't he? Nor did he expect to gain more ground with Seerdomin. Perhaps something more extreme was required. *No, Seerdomin is a private man. Let him be. Remain watchful, yes, as any friend would. And wait.*

If he had walked from the nearest coast, the lone figure crossing the grasslands of north Lamatath had travelled a hundred leagues of unsettled prairie. Nowhere to find food beyond hunting the sparse game, all of it notoriously fleet of foot and hoof. He was gaunt, but then, he had always been gaunt. His thin, grey hair was unkempt, drifting out long in his wake. His beard was matted, knotted with filth. His eyes, icy blue, were as feral as any beast of the plain.

A long coat of chain rustled, swinging clear of his shins with each stride. The shadow he cast was narrow as a sword.

In the cloudless sky wheeled vultures or ravens, or both, so high as to be nothing but specks, yet they tracked the solitary figure far below. Or perhaps they but skirled in the blue emptiness scanning the wastes for some dying, weakening creature.

But this man was neither dying nor weak. He walked with the stiff purpose characteristic of the mad, the deranged. Madness, he would have noted, does not belong to the soul engaged with the world, with every hummock and tuft of grass, with the old beach ridges with their cobbles of limestone pushing through the thin, patched skin of lichen and brittle moss. With the mocking stab of shadow that slowly wheeled as the sun dragged itself across the sky. With the sounds of his own breath that were proof that he remained alive, that the world had yet to take him, pull him down, steal the warmth from his ancient flesh. Madness stalked only an inner torment, and Kallor, the High King, supreme emperor of a dozen terrible empires, was, in his heart, a man at peace.

For the moment. But what mattered beyond just that? This single moment, pitching headlong into the next one, over and over again, as firm and true as each step he took, the hard ground reverberating up through the worn heels of his boots. The tactile affirmed reality, and nothing else mattered and never would.

A man at peace, yes indeed. And that he had once ruled the lives of hundreds of thousands, ruled over their useless, petty existences; that he had once, with a single gesture, condemned a surrendered army of fifteen thousand to their deaths; that he had sat a throne of gold, silver and onyx, like a glutton stuffed to overflowing with such material wealth that it had lost all meaning, all value . . . ah well, all that remained of such times, such glory, was the man himself, his sword, his armour, and a handful of antiquated coins in his pouch. Endless betrayals, a sea of faces made blurry and vague by centuries, with naught but the avaricious, envious glitter of their eyes remaining sharp in his mind; the sweep of smoke and fire and faint screams as empires toppled, one after another; the chaos of brutal nights fleeing a palace in flames, fleeing such a tide of vengeful fools that even Kallor could not kill them all – much as he wanted to, oh, yes – none of these things awakened bitter ire in his soul. Here in this wasteland that no one wanted, he was a man at peace.

Such truth could not be challenged, and were someone to rise up from the very earth now and stand in such challenge, why, he would cut him to pieces. Smiling all the while to evince his calm repose.

Too much weight was given to history, as far as Kallor was concerned. One's own history; that of peoples, cultures, landscapes. What value peering at past errors in judgement, at mischance and carelessness, when the only reward after all that effort was regret? Bah! Regret was the refuge of fools, and Kallor was no fool. He had lived out his every ambition, after all, lived each one out until all colour was drained away, leaving a bleached, wan knowledge that there wasn't much in life truly worth the effort to achieve it. That the rewards proved ephemeral; nay, worthless.

Every emperor in every realm, through all of time itself, soon found that the lofty title and all its power was an existence devoid of humour. Even excess and indulgences palled, eventually. And the faces of the dying, the tortured, well, they were all the same, and not one of those twisted expressions vouchsafed a glimmer of revelation, the discovery of some profound, last-breath secret that answered all the great questions. No, every face simply pulled into itself, shrank and recoiled even as agony tugged and

stretched, and whatever the bulging eyes saw at the last moment was, Kallor now understood, something utterly . . . banal.

Now there was an enemy – banality. The demesne of the witless, the proud tower of the stupid. One did not need to be an emperor to witness it – scan the faces of people encircling an overturned carriage, the gleam of their eyes as they strain and stretch to catch a glimpse of blood, of broken limbs, relishing some pointless tragedy that tops up their murky inkwells of life. Watch, yes, those vultures of grief, and then speak of noble humanity, so wise and so virtuous.

Unseen by the ravens or condors, Kallor had now bared his teeth in a bleak smile, as if seeking to emulate the face of that tragically fallen idiot, pinned there beneath the carriage wheel, seeing the last thing he would see, and finding it in the faces of the gawkers, and thinking, *Oh, look at you all. So banal. So . . . banal.*

He startled a hare from some scrub, twenty paces away, and his left hand flashed out, underhand, and a knife sped in a blur, catching the hare in mid-leap, flipping it round in the air before it fell.

A slight tack, and he halted to stand over the small, motionless body, looking down at the tiny droplets of spilled blood. The knife sunk to the hilt, driven right through just in front of the hips – the gut, then, not good. Sloppy.

He crouched, pulled loose the knife then quickly sliced open the belly and tugged and tore out the hare's warm intestines. He held the glistening ropes up in one hand, studied them and whispered, *'Banal.'*

An eye of the hare stared up sightlessly, everything behind it closed up, gone away.

But he'd seen all that before. More times than he could count. Hares, people, all the same. In that last moment, yes, there was nothing to see, so what else to do but go away?

He flung the guts to one side, picked up the carcass by its elongated hind limbs and resumed his journey. The hare was coming with him. Not that it

cared. Later, they'd sit down for dinner.

High in the sky overhead, the black specks began a descent. Their equally empty eyes had spied the entrails, spread in lumpy grey ropes on the yellow grasses, now in the lone man's wake. Empty eyes, but a different kind of emptiness. Not that of death's banality, no, but that of life's banality.

The same kind of eyes as Kallor's own.

And this was the mercy in the hare's swift death, for unlike countless hundreds of thousands of humans, the creature's last glimpse was not of Kallor's profoundly empty eyes – a sight that brought terror into the face of every victim.

The world, someone once said, gives back what is given. In abundance. But then, as Kallor would point out, someone was always saying something. Until he got fed up and had them executed.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Pray, do not speak to me of weather
Not sun, not cloud, not of the places
Where storms are born
I would not know of wind shivering the heather
Nor sleet, nor rain, nor of ancient traces
On stone grey and worn

Pray, do not regale the troubles of ill health
Not self, not kin, not of the old woman
At the road's end
I will spare no time nor in mercy yield wealth
Nor thought, nor feeling, nor shrouds woven
To tempt luck's send

Pray, tell me of deep chasms crossed
Not left, not turned, not of the betrayals
Breeding like worms
I would you cry out your rage 'gainst what is lost
Now strong, now to weep, now to make fist and rail
On earth so firm

Pray, sing loud the wretched glories of love
Now pain, now drunken, now torn from all reason
In laughter and tears
I would you bargain with the fey gods above
Nor care, nor cost, nor turn of season
To wintry fears

Sing to me this and I will find you unflinching
Now knowing, now seeing, now in the face
Of the howling storm
Sing your life as if a life without ending

And your love, sun's bright fire, on its celestial pace
To where truth is born

*Pray, An End to Inconsequential Things*
Baedisk of Nathilog

Darujhistan. Glories unending! Who could call a single deed inconsequential? This scurrying youth with his arms full of vegetables, the shouts from the stall in his wake, the gauging eye of a guard thirty paces away, assessing the poor likelihood of catching the urchin. Insignificant? Nonsense! Hungry mouths fed, glowing pride, some fewer coins for the hawker, perhaps, but it seemed all profit did was fill a drunken husband's tankard anyway so the bastard could die of thirst for all she cared! A guard's congenitally flawed heart beat on, not yet pushed to bursting by hard pursuit through the crowded market, and so he lives a few weeks longer, enough to complete his full twenty years' service and so guarantee his wife and children a pension. And of course the one last kiss was yet to come, the kiss that whispered volumes of devotion and all the rest.

The pot-thrower in the hut behind the shop, hands and forearms slick with clay, dreaming, yes, of the years in which a life took shape, when each press of a fingertip sent a deep track across a once smooth surface, changing the future, reshaping the past, and was this not as much chance as design? For all that intent could score a path, that the ripples sent up and down and outward could be surmised by decades of experience, was the outcome ever truly predictable?

Oh, of course she wasn't thinking any such thing. An ache in her left wrist obliterated all thoughts beyond the persistent ache itself, and what it might portend and what herbs she would need to brew to ease her discomfort – and how could such concerns be inconsequential?

What of the child sitting staring into the doleful eye of a yoked ox outside Corb's Womanly Charms where her mother was inside and had been for near a bell now, though of course Mother had Uncle-Doruth-who-was-a-secret for company which was better than an ox that did nothing but moan? The giant, soft, dark-so-dark brown eye stared back and to think in both directions was obvious but what was the ox thinking except that the yoke was heavy and the cart even heavier and it'd be nice to lie down and what could the child be thinking about but beef stew and so no little philosopher was born, although in years to come, why, she'd have her own uncle-who-

was-a-secret and thus like her mother enjoy all the fruits of marriage with few of the niggling pits.

And what of the sun high overhead, bursting with joyous light to bathe the wondrous city like a benediction of all things consequential? Great is the need, so sudden, so pressing, to reach up, close fingers about the fiery orb, to drag it back – and back! – into night and its sprawled darkness, where all manner of things of import have trembled the heavens and the very roots of the earth, or nearly so.

Back, then, the short round man demands, for this is his telling, his knowing, his cry of *Witness!* echoing still, and still. The night of arrivals, the deeds of the arrived, even as night arrives! Let nothing of consequence be forgot.

Let nothing of inconsequence be deemed so and who now could even imagine such things to exist, recalling with wise nod the urchin thief, the hawker, the guard. The thrower of pots and the child and the ox and Uncle Doruth with his face between the legs of another man's wife, all to come (excuse!) in the day ahead.

Mark, too, this teller of the tale, with his sage wink. We are in the midst!

Night, shadows overlapping, a most indifferent blur that would attract no one's notice, barring that nuisance of a cat on the sill of the estate, amber eyes tracking now as one shadow moves out from its place of temporary concealment. Out goes this errant shadow, across the courtyard, into deeper shadows against the estate's wall.

Crouching, Torvald Nom looked up to see the cat's head and those damned eyes, peering down at him. A moment later the head withdrew, taking its wide gaze with it. He made his stealthy way to the back corner, paused once more. He could hear the gate guards, a pair of them, arguing over something, tones of suspicion leading to accusation answered by protestations of denial but *Damn you, Doruth, I just don't trust you—*

*—No reason not to, Milok. I ever give you one? No—*

*—To Hood you ain't. My first wife—*

*—Wouldn't leave me alone, I swear! She stalked me like a cat a rat—*

*—A rat! Aye, that's about right—*

*—I swear, Milok, she very nearly raped me—*

*—The first time! I know, she told me all about it, with eyes so bright!—*

*—Heard it made you horny as Hood's black sceptre—*

*—That ain't any of your business, Doruth—*

And something soft brushed against Torvald's leg. The cat, purring like soft gravel, back bowed, tail writhing. He lifted his foot, held it hovering over the creature. Hesitated, then settled it back down. By Apsalar's sweet kiss, the kit's eyes and ears might be a boon, come to think of it. Assuming it had the nerve to follow him.

Torvald eyed the wall, the cornices, the scrollwork metopes, the braided false columns. He wiped sweat from his hands, dusted them with the grit at the wall's base, then reached up for handholds, and began to climb.

He gained the sill of the window on the upper floor, pulled himself on to it, balanced on his knees. True, never wise, but the fall wouldn't kill him, wouldn't even sprain an ankle, would it? Drawing a dagger he slipped the blade in between the shutters, carefully felt for the latch.

The cat, alighting beside him, nearly pitched him from the sill, but he managed to recover, swearing softly under his breath as he resumed working the lock.

*—She still loves you, you know—*

*—What—*

*—She does. She just likes some variety. I tell you, Milok, this last one of yours was no easy conquest—*

*—You swore!—*

*—You're my bestest, oldest friend. No more secrets between us! And when I swear to that, as I'm doing now, I mean it true. She's got an appetite so*

*sharing shouldn't be a problem. I ain't better than you, just different, that's all. Different—*

*—How many times a week, Duroth? Tell me true!—*

*—Oh, every second day or so—*

*—But I'm every second day, too!—*

*—Odd, even, I guess. Like I said, an appetite—*

*—I'll say—*

*—After shift, let's go get drunk—*

*—Aye, we can compare and contrast—*

*—I love it. Just that, hah! . . . Hey, Milok . . .—*

*—Aye?—*

*—How old's your daughter?—*

The latch clicked, springing free the shutters just as a sword hissed from a scabbard and, amidst wild shouting, a fight was underway at the gate.

*—A joke! Honest! Just a joke, Milok!—*

Voices now from the front of the house, as Torvald slid his dagger blade between the lead windows and lifted the inside latch. He quickly edged into the dark room, as boots rapped on the compound and more shouting erupted at the front gate. A lantern crashed and someone's sword went flying to skitter away on the cobbles.

Torvald quickly closed the shutters, then the window.

The infernal purring was beside him, a soft jaw rubbing against a knee. He reached for the cat, fingers twitching, hesitated, then withdrew his hand. Pay attention to the damned thing, right, so when it hears what can't be heard and when it sees what can't be seen, yes . . .

Pivoting in his crouch, he scanned the room. Some sort of study, though most of the shelves were bare. Overreaching ambition, this room, a sudden

lurch towards culture and sophistication, but of course it was doomed to failure. Money wasn't enough. Intelligence helped. Taste, an inquisitive mind, an interest in other stuff – stuff out of immediate sight, stuff having nothing to do with whatever. Wasn't enough to simply send some servant to scour some scrollmonger's shop and say 'I'll take that shelf's worth, and that one, too.' Master's not too discriminating, yes. Master probably can't even read so what difference does it make?

He crept over to the one shelf on which were heaped a score or so scrolls, along with one leather-bound book. Each scroll was rolled tight, tied with some seller's label – just as he had suspected. Torvald began reading through them.

*Treatise on Drainage Grooves in Stone Gutters of Gadrobi District, Nineteenth Report in the Year of the Shrew, Extraordinary Subjects, Guild of Quarry Engineering. Author: Member 322.*

*Tales of Pamby Doughty and the World Inside the Trunk (with illustrations by some dead man).*

*The Lost Verses of Anomandaris, with annotation.* Torvald's brows rose, since this one might actually be worth something. He quickly slipped the string off and unfurled the scroll. The vellum was blank, barring a short annotation at the bottom that read: *No scholarly erudition is possible at the moment.* And a publisher's mark denoting this scroll as part of a series of Lost Works, published by the Vellum Makers' Guild of Pale.

He rolled the useless thing back up, plucked out one more.

*An Illustrated Guide to Headgear of Cobblers of Genabaris in the fourth century, Burn's Sleep, by Cracktooth Filcher, self-avowed serial collector and scourge of cobblers, imprisoned for life. A publication of Prisoner's Pit Library, Nathilog.*

He had no doubt the illustrations were lavish and meticulous, detailed to excess, but somehow his curiosity was not up to the challenge of perusal.

By now the commotion at the gate had been settled. Various members of the guard had returned from the fracas, with much muttering and cursing

that fell away abruptly as soon as they entered the main house on their way to their rooms, telling Torvald that the master was indeed home and probably asleep. Which was something of a problem, given just how paranoid the bastard was and as the likely hiding place of his trove was somewhere in his damned bedroom. Well, the world presented its challenges, and without challenges life was worthless and pointless and, most crucially, devoid of interest.

He moved to the door leading to the hallway, pausing to wrap a cloth about his face, leaving only his eyes free. The cat watched intently. Lifting the latch he tugged the door open and peered out into the corridor. Left, the outer, back wall not three paces away. Right, the aisle reaching all the way through the house. Doors and a central landing for the staircase. And a guard, seated facing that landing. Black hair, red, bulbous nose, protruding lower lip, and enough muscles slabbed on to a gigantic frame to fill out two or three Torvald Noms. The fool was knitting, his mouth moving and brow knotting as he counted stitches.

And there was the horrid cat, padding straight for him.

Torvald quietly closed the door.

He should have strangled the thing.

From the corridor he heard a grunting curse, then boots thumping down the stairs.

Opening the door once more he looked out. The guard was gone, the knitting lying on the floor with one strand leading off down the stairs.

Hah! Brilliant cat! Why, if he met it again he'd kiss it – but nowhere near where it licked itself because there were limits, after all, and anywhere a cat could lick itself was nowhere he'd kiss.

Torvald quickly closed the door behind him and tiptoed up the corridor. A cautious glance down the wide, central staircase. Wherever the cat had run off with the ball of wool, it was out of sight, and so too the guard. He faced the ornate double doors directly behind the vacated wooden chair.

Locked?

Yes.

He drew his dagger and slid the thin blade between the doors.

Ornate decoration was often accompanied by neglect of the necessary mechanisms, and this lock followed the rule, as he felt the latch lift away. Boots sounded downstairs. He tugged open the door and quickly slipped inside, crouching once more. A front room, an office of sorts, with a single lantern on a short wick casting faint light across the desk and its strewn heap of papyrus sheets. A second door, smaller, narrow, behind the desk's high-backed plush chair.

Torvald Nom tiptoed towards it.

Pausing at the desk to douse the lantern, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, crouching yet lower to squint at the crack beneath the bedroom door, pleased to find no thread of light. Drawing up against the panelled wood with its gold-leaf insets now dull in the gloom. No lock this time. Hinges feeling well oiled. He slowly worked the door open.

Inside, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Soft breathing from the huge four-poster bed. Then a sigh. 'Sweet sliverfishy, is that you?'

A woman's husky, whispering voice, and now stirring sounds from the bed.

'The night stalker this time? Ooh, that one's fun – I'll keep my eyes closed and whimper lots when you threaten me to stay quiet. Hurry, I'm lying here, petrified. *Someone's in my room!'*

Torvald Nom hesitated, truly torn between necessity and . . . well, necessity.

He untied his rope belt. And, in a hissing voice, demanded, 'First, the treasure. Where is it, woman?'

She gasped. 'That's a good voice! A new one! The treasure, ah! You know where it is, you horrible creature! Right here between my legs!'

Torvald rolled his eyes. 'Not that one. The other one.'

'If I don't tell you?'

'Then I will have my way with you.'

'Oh! I say nothing! Please!'

Damn, he sure messed that one up. There was no way she'd not know he wasn't who he was pretending to be, even when that someone was pretending to be someone else. How to solve this?

'Get on your stomach. Now, on your hands and knees. Yes, like that.'

'You're worse than an animal!'

Torvald paused at the foot of the bed. Worse than an animal? What did that mean? Shaking his head, he climbed on to the bed. Well, here goes nothing.

A short time later: 'Sliverfishy! The new elixir? Gods, it's spectacular! Why, I can't call you sliverfishy any more, can I? More like . . . a salmon! Charging upstream! Oh!'

'The treasure, or I'll use this knife.' And he pressed the cold blade of the dagger against the outside of her right thigh.

She gasped again. 'Under the bed! Don't hurt me! Keep pushing, damn you! Harder! This one's going to make a baby – I know it! This time, a baby!'

Well, he did his part anyway, feeding his coins into the temple's cup and all that, and may her prayers guide her true into motherhood's blissful heaven. She collapsed on to the bed, groaning, while he backed off, knelt on the cold wooden floor and reached under the bed, knuckles skinning against a large, low longbox. Groping, he found one handle and dragged it out.

She moaned. 'Oh, don't start counting again, darling. Please. You ruin everything when you do that!'

'Not counting, woman. Stealing. Stay where you are. Eyes closed. Don't move.'

'It just sounds silly now, you know that.'

'Shut up, or I'll do you again.'

'Ah! What was that elixir again?'

He prised open the lock with the tip of the dagger. Inside, conveniently stored in burlap sacks tagged with precise amounts, a fortune of gems, jewels and high councils. He quickly collected the loot.

'You *are* counting!'

'I warned you.' He climbed back on to the bed. Looked down and saw that promises weren't quite enough. *Gods below, if you only were.* 'Listen,' he said, 'I need more elixir.

In the office. Don't move.'

'I won't. I promise.'

He hurried out, crept across the outer room and paused at the doors to the corridor to press his ear against the panel.

Softly, the slither-click of bamboo knitting needles.

Torvald slid the dagger into its scabbard, reversed grip, opened the door, looked down at the top of the guard's hairy head, and swung hard. The pommel crunched. The man sagged in his chair, then folded into a heap at the foot of the chair.

The cat was waiting by the library door.

*

Uncle One, Uncle Two, Father None. Aunt One, Aunt Two, Mother None.

Present and on duty, Uncle One, Aunt One and Cousins One, Two, Three. Cousin One edging closer, almost close enough for another hard, sharp jab with an elbow as One made to collect another onion from the heap on the table. But he knew One's games, had a year's list of bruises to prove it, and so, just as accidentally, he took a half-step away, keeping on his face a beaming smile as Aunt One cooed her delight at this sudden bounty, and

Uncle One sat opposite, ready to deliver his wink as soon as he glanced over – which he wouldn't do yet because timing, as Uncle Two always told him, was everything. Besides, he needed to be aware of Cousin One especially now that the first plan had been thwarted.

One, whose name was Snell, would have to work harder in his head, work that cunning which seemed to come from nowhere and wasn't part of the dull stupidity that was One's actual brain, so maybe it was demons after all, clattering and chittering all their cruel ideas. Snell wouldn't let this rest, he knew. No, he'd remember and start planning. And the hurt would be all the worse for that.

But right now he didn't care, not about Cousin One, not about anything that might come later tonight or tomorrow. He'd brought food home, after all, an armload of food, delivering his treasure to joyous cries of relief.

And the man whose name he'd been given, the man long dead who was neither Uncle One nor Uncle Two but had been Uncle Three and not, of course, Father One, well, that man would be proud that the boy with his name was doing what was needed to keep the family together.

Collecting his own onion, the child named Harllo made his way to a safe corner of the single room, and, moments before taking a bite, glanced up to meet Uncle One's eyes, to catch the wink and then nod in answer.

Just like Uncle Two always said, timing was how a man measured the world, and his place in it. Timing wasn't a maybe world, it was a world of yes and no, this, not that. Now, not later. Timing belonged to all the beasts of nature that hunted other creatures. It belonged to the tiger and its fixed, watching eyes. It belonged, too, to the prey, when the hunter became hunted, like with Cousin One, each moment a contest, a battle, a duel. But Harllo was learning the tiger's way, thanks to Uncle Two, whose very skin could change into that of a tiger, when anger awakened cold and deadly. Who had a tiger's eyes and was the bravest, wisest man in all of Darujhistan.

And the only one, apart from young Harllo himself, who knew the truth of Aunt Two, who wasn't Aunt Two at all, but Mother One. Even if she

wouldn't admit it, wouldn't ever say it, and wouldn't have hardly nothing to do with her only child, her *son of Rape.* Once, Harllo had thought that Rape was his father's name, but now he knew it was a thing people did to other people, as mean as an elbow in the ribs, maybe meaner. And that was why Mother One stayed Aunt Two, and why on those rare occasions she visited she wouldn't meet Harllo's eyes no matter how he tried, and why she wouldn't say anything about nothing except with a voice that was all anger.

*'Aunt Stonny hates words, Harllo,*' Gruntle had explained, *'but only when those words creep too close to her, to where she hides, you see?'*

Yes, he saw. He saw plenty.

Snell caught his eye and made a wicked face, mouthing vicious promises. His little sister, Cousin Two, whose name was Mew, was watching from where she held on to the table edge, seeing but not understanding because how could she, being only three years old; while Cousin Three, another girl but this one named Hinty, was all swathed in the cradle and safe in there, safe from everything, which was how it should be for the littlest ones.

Harllo was five, maybe close to six, but already tall – *stretched*, laughed Gruntle, *stretched and scrawny because that's how boys grow.*

Aunt Myrla had the rest of the vegetables in a steaming pot over the hearth, and Harllo saw her flick a knowing look at her husband, who nodded, not pausing in massaging the stumps below his knees, where most people had shins and ankles and then feet, but Uncle Bedek had had an accident – which was something like Rape only not on purpose – and so he couldn't walk any more which made life hard for them all, and meant Harllo had to do what was needed since Snell didn't seem interested in doing anything. Except torment Harllo, of course.

The air in the cramped room was smelling earthy and sweet now, as Myrla fed more dung on to the small hearth beneath the pot. Harllo knew he'd have to go out and collect more come the morrow and that might mean right out of the city, up along the West Shore of the lake, which was an adventure.

Snell finished his onion and crept closer to Harllo, hands tightening into fists.

But Harllo had already heard the boots in the alley outside, crackling on the dead fronds from the collapsed roof opposite, and a moment later Uncle Two swept the hanging aside and leaned into the room, the barbs on his face looking freshly painted, so stark were they, and his eyes glowed like candle flames. His smile revealed fangs.

Bedek waved. 'Gruntle! Do come in, old friend! See how Myrla readies a feast!'

'Well timed, then,' the huge man replied, entering the room, 'for I have brought smoked horse.' Seeing Harllo, he waved the boy over. 'Need to put some muscle on this one.'

'Oh,' said Myrla, 'he never sits still, that's his problem. Not for a moment!'

Snell was scowling, scuttling in retreat and looking upon Gruntle with hatred and fear.

Gruntle picked up Harllo, then held him squirming under one arm as he took the two steps to the hearth to hand Myrla a burlap-wrapped package.

Bedek was eyeing Gruntle. 'Glad you made it back,' he said in a low voice. 'Heard about you at the gate and that moment in Worrytown – damn, but I wish I wasn't so . . . useless.'

Setting Harllo down, Gruntle sighed. 'Maybe your days of riding with caravans are done, but that doesn't make you useless. You're raising a fine family, Bedek, a fine family.'

'I ain't raising nothing,' Bedek muttered, and Harllo knew that tone, knew it all too well, and it might be days, maybe even a week, before Uncle One climbed back up from the dark, deep hole he was now in. The problem was, Bedek liked that place, liked the way Myrla closed round him, all caresses and embraces and soft murmurings, and it'd go on like that until the night came when they made noises in their bed, and come the next morning, why, Bedek would be smiling.

When Myrla was like that, though, when she was all for her husband and nothing else, it fell to Harllo to tend to the girls and do everything that was needed, and worst of all, it meant no one was holding back Snell. The beatings would get bad, then.

Myrla couldn't work much, not since the last baby, when she'd hurt something in her belly and now she got tired too easy, and even this glorious supper she was creating would leave her exhausted and weak with a headache. When able, she'd mend clothes, but that wasn't happening much of late, which made Harllo's raiding the local markets all the more important.

He stayed close to Gruntle, who now sat opposite Uncle Bedek and had produced a jar of wine, and this kept Snell away for now, which of course only made things worse later but that was all right. You couldn't choose your family, after all, not your cousins, not anyone. They were there and that was that.

Besides, he could leave early tomorrow morning, so early Snell wouldn't even be awake, and he'd make his way out of the city, out along the lake shore where the world stretched away, where beyond the shanties there were hills with nothing but goats and shepherds and beyond even them there was nothing but empty land. That such a thing could exist whispered to Harllo of possibilities, ones that he couldn't hope to name or put into words, but were all out in the future life that seemed blurry, ghostly, but a promise even so. As bright as Gruntle's eyes, that promise, and it was that promise that Harllo held on to, when Snell's fists were coming down.

Bedek and Gruntle talked about the old days, when they'd both worked the same caravans, and it seemed to Harllo that the past – a world he'd never seen because it was before the Rape – was a place of great deeds, a place thick with life where the sun was brighter, the sunsets were deeper, the stars blazed in a black sky and the moon was free of mists, and men stood taller and prouder and nobody had to talk about the past back then, because it was happening right now.

Maybe that was how he would find the future, a new time in which to stand tall. A time he could stretch into.

Across from Harllo, Snell crouched in a gloomy corner, his eyes filled with their own promise as he grinned at Harllo.

Myrla brought them plates heaped with food.

The papyrus sheets, torn into shreds, lit quickly, sending black flakes upward in the chimney's draught, and Duiker watched them go, seeing crows, thousands of crows. Thieves of memory, stealing everything else he might have thought about, might have resurrected to ease the uselessness of his present life. All the struggles to recall faces had been surrendered, and his every effort to write down this dread history had failed. Words flat and lifeless, scenes described in the voice of the dead.

Who were those comrades at his side back then? Who were those Wickans and Malazans, those warlocks and warriors, those soldiers and sacrificial victims who perched above the road, like sentinels of futility, staring down at their own marching shadows?

Bult. Lull. Sormo Enath.

Coltaine.

Names, then, but no faces. The chaos and terror of fighting, of reeling in exhaustion, of wounds slashed open and bleeding, of dust and the reek of spilled wastes – no, he could not write of that, could not relate the truth of it, any of it.

*Memory fails. For ever doomed as we seek to fashion scenes, framed, each act described, reasoned and reasonable, irrational and mad, but somewhere beneath there must be the thick, solid sludge of motivation, of significance, of meaning – there must be. The alternative is . . . unacceptable.*

But this was where his attempts delivered him, again and again. The unacceptable truths, the ones no sane person could ever face, could ever meet eye to eye. That nothing was worth revering, not even the simple fact of survival, and certainly not that endless cascade of failures, of deaths beyond counting.

Even here, in this city of peace, he watched the citizens in all their daily dances, and with each moment that passed, his disdain deepened. He disliked the way his thoughts grew ever more uncharitable, ever more baffled by the endless scenes of seemingly mindless, pointless existence, but there seemed no way out of that progression as his observations unveiled the pettiness of life, the battles silent and otherwise with wives, husbands, friends, children, parents, with the very crush on a crowded street, each life closed round itself, righteous and uncaring of strangers – people fully inside their own lives. Yet should he not revel in such things? In their profound freedom, in their extraordinary luxury of imagining themselves in control of their own lives?

Of course, they weren't. In freedom, such as each might possess, they raised their own barriers, carried shackles fashioned by their own hands. Rattling the chains of emotions, of fears and worries, of need and spite, of the belligerence that railed against the essential anonymity that gripped a person. Aye, a most unacceptable truth.

Was this the driving force behind the quest for power? To tear away anonymity, to raise fame and infamy up like a blazing shield and shining sword? To voice a cry that would be heard beyond the gates of one's own life?

But oh, Duiker had heard enough such cries. He had stood, cowering, in the midst of howls of defiance and triumph, all turning sour with despair, with senseless rage. The echoes of power were uniform, yes, in their essential emptiness. Any historian worthy of the title could see that.

No, there was no value in writing. No more effect than a babe's fists battering at the silence that ignored every cry. History meant nothing, because the only continuity was human stupidity. Oh, there were moments of greatness, of bright deeds, but how long did the light of such glory last? From one breath to the next, aye, and no more than that. No more than that. *As for the rest, kick through the bones and wreckage for they are what remain, what lasts until all turns to dust.*

'You are looking thoughtful,' Mallet observed, leaning forward with a grunt to top up Duiker's tankard. 'Which, I suppose, should not come as a

surprise, since you just burned the efforts of most of a year, not to mention a high council's worth of papyrus.'

'I will reimburse you the cost,' Duiker said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' the healer said, leaning back. 'I only said you looked thoughtful.'

'Appearances deceive, Mallet. I am not interested in thinking any more. About anything.'

'Good, then this is a true meeting of minds.'

Duiker continued studying the fire, continued watching the black crows wing up the chimney. 'For you, unwise,' he said. 'You have assassins to consider.'

Mallet snorted. 'Assassins. Antsy's already talking about digging up a dozen cussers. Blend's out hunting down the Guild's headquarters, while Picker and Bluepearl work with Councillor Coll to sniff out the source of the contract. Give it all a week and the problem will cease being a problem. Permanently.'

Duiker half smiled. 'Don't mess with Malazan marines, retired or otherwise.'

'You'd think people would know by now, wouldn't you?'

'People are stupid, Mallet.'

The healer winced. 'Not all of us.'

'True. But Hood waits for everyone, stupid, smart, witty, witless. Waits with the same knowing smile.'

'No wonder you burned your book, Duiker.'

'Yes.'

'So, since you're no longer writing history, what will you do?'

'Do? Why, nothing.'

'Now that's something I know all about – oh, don't even try to object. Aye, I heal someone every now and then, but I was a soldier, once. And now I'm not. Now I sit around getting fat, and it's fat poisoned through and through with some kind of cynical bile. I lost all my friends, Duiker. No different from you. Lost 'em all, and for what? Damned if I know, damned and damned again, but no, I don't know the why of it, the why of anything.'

'A meeting of minds, indeed,' Duiker said. 'Then again, Mallet, it seems you are at war once more. Against the usual implacable, deadly enemy.'

'The Guild? I suppose you're right. But it won't last long, will it? I don't like being retired. It's like announcing an end to your worth, whatever that worth was, and the longer you go on, the more you realize that that worth wasn't worth anything like you once thought it was, and that just makes it worse.'

Duiker set down his tankard and rose. 'The High Alchemist has invited me to lunch on the morrow. I'd best go to bed and get some sleep. Watch your back, healer. Sometimes the lad pushes and the lady's nowhere in sight.'

Mallet simply nodded, having assumed the burden of staring at the fire now that Duiker was leaving.

The historian walked away from the warmth, passing through draughts and layers of chill air on his way to his room. Colder and colder, with every step.

Somewhere above this foul temple, crows danced with sparks above the mouth of a chimney, virtually unseen in the darkness. Each one carried a word, but the sparks were deaf. Too busy with the ecstasy of their own bright, blinding fire. At least, until they went out.

Gaz stormed out early, as soon as he realized he wasn't going to get enough coin from the day's take to buy a worthwhile night of drinking. Thordy watched her husband go, that pathetic forward tilt of the man's walk which always came when he was enraged, the jerky strides as he marched out into the night. Where he went she had no idea, nor, truth be told, did she even care.

Twice now in the past week that skinny mite of an urchin had raided her vegetable stand. Gods, what were parents up to these days? The runt was probably five years old, no older that's for sure, and already fast as an eel in the shallows – and why wasn't he leashed as a child should be? Especially at that age when there were plenty of people who'd snatch him, use him or sell him quick as can be. And if they used him in that bad way, then they'd wring his neck afterwards, which Thordy might not mind so much except that it was a cruel thought and a cruel picture and more like something her husband would think than her. Though he'd only be thinking in terms of how much money she might make without the thieving going on. And maybe what he might do if he ever got his hands on the runt.

She shivered at that thought, then was distracted by Nou the watchdog in the garden next to hers, an unusual eruption of barking – but then she remembered her husband and his walk and how Nou hated Gaz especially when he walked like that. When Gaz stumbled back home, drunk and useless, the mangy dog never made a sound, ignored Gaz straight out, in fact.

Dogs, she knew, could smell bad intentions. Other animals too, but especially dogs.

Gaz never touched Thordy, not even a shove or a slap, because without her and the garden she tended he was in trouble, and he knew that well enough. He'd been tempted, many times, oh, yes, but there'd be, all of a sudden, a glint in his eyes, a surprise, flickering alight. And he'd smile and turn away, saving that mangled fist and all that was behind it for someone else. Gaz liked a good fight, in some alley behind a tavern. Liked kicking faces in, so long as the victim was smaller than he was, and more drunk. And without any friends who might step in or come up from behind. It was how he dealt with the misery of his life, or so he said often enough.

Thordy wasn't sure what all that misery was about, though she had some ideas. Her, for one. The pathetic patch of ground she had for her vegetables. Her barren womb. The way age and hard work was wearing her down, stealing the glow she'd once had. Oh, there was plenty about her that made him miserable. And, all things considered, she'd been lucky to have him for

so long, especially when he'd worked the nets on that fisher boat, the nets that, alas, had taken all his fingers that night when something big had waited down below, motionless and so unnoticed as the crew hauled the net aboard. Then it exploded in savage power, making for the river like a battering ram. Gaz's fingers, all entwined, sprang like topped carrots, and now he had thumbs and rows of knuckles and nothing else.

Fists made for fighting, he'd say with an unconscious baring of his teeth. *That and nothing more.*

And that was true enough and good reason, she supposed, for getting drunk every chance he could.

Lately, however, she'd been feeling a little less generous – no, she'd been feeling not much of anything at all. Even pity had dwindled, whispered away like a dry leaf on the autumn wind. And it was as if he had changed, right in front of her eyes, though she now understood that what had changed was behind her eyes – not the one looked at, but the one doing the looking. She no longer recoiled in the face of his fury. No longer shied from that marching tilt and all its useless anger, and would now study it, seeing its futility, seeing the self-pity in that wounded pitch.

She was empty, then, and she had first thought she would remain so, probably for the rest of her life. Instead, something had begun to fill the void. At first, it arrived with a start, a twinge of guilt, but not any more. Now, when thoughts of murder filled her head, it was like immersing herself in a scented bath.

Gaz was miserable. He said so. He'd be happier if he were dead.

And, truth be told, so would she.

All this love, all this desperate need, and he was useless. She should have driven him out of her life long ago, and he knew it. Holding on to him the way she was doing was torture. He'd told her he only fought weaklings. Fools and worse. He told her he did it to keep his arms strong, to harden his knuckles, to hold on to (hah, that was a good one) some kind of reason for staying alive. A man needs a skill, aye, and no matter if it was good or bad,

no matter at all. But the truth was, he chose the meanest, biggest bastards he could find. Proving he could, proving those knuckles and their killing ways.

Killing, aye. Four so far, that he was sure of.

Sooner or later, Gaz knew, the coin would flip, and it would be his cold corpse lying face down in some alley. Well enough. When you pay out more than you're worth, again and again, eventually somebody comes to collect.

She'd not mourn him, he knew. A man in love could see when the one he loved stopped loving him back. He did not blame her, and did not love her any less; no, his need just got worse.

The Blue Ball Tavern occupied one corner of a massive, decrepit heap of tenements that stank of urine and rotting rubbish. In the midst of the fête, the nightly anarchy on these back streets up from the docks reached new heights, and Gaz was not alone in hunting the alleys for trouble.

It occurred to him that maybe he wasn't as unusual as he might have once believed. That maybe he was just one among thousands of useless thugs in this city, all of them hating themselves and out sniffing trails like so many mangy dogs. Those who knew him gave him space, slinking back from his path as he stalked towards his chosen fighting grounds, behind the Blue Ball. That brief thought – about other people, about the shadowed faces he saw around him – was short-lived, flitting away with the first smell of blood in the damp, sultry air.

Someone had beaten him to it, and might even now be swaggering out the opposite end of the alley. Well, maybe the fool might circle back, and he could deliver to the bastard what he'd done to somebody else – and there was the body, the huddled, motionless shape. Walking up, Gaz nudged it with one boot. Heard a blood-frothed wheeze. Slammed his heel down on the ribcage, just to hear the snap and crunch. A cough, spraying blood, a low groan, then a final exhalation.

Done, easy as that.

'Are you pleased, Gaz?'

He spun round at the soft, deep voice, forearms lifting into a guard he expected to fail – but the fist he thought was coming never arrived, and, swearing, he stepped back until his shoulders thudded against the wall, glared in growing fear at the tall, shrouded figure standing before him. 'I ain't afraid,' he said in a belligerent growl.

Amusement washed up against him like a wave. 'Open yourself, Gaz. Your soul. Welcome your god.'

Gaz could feel the air on his teeth, could feel his lips stretching until cracks split to ooze blood. His heart hammered at his chest. 'I ain't got no god. I'm nothing but curses, and I don't know you. Not at all.'

'Of course you do, Gaz. You have made sacrifice to me, six times now. And counting.'

Gaz could not see the face within the hood, but the air between them was suddenly thick with some pungent, cloying scent. Like cold mud, the kind that ran in turgid streams behind slaughterhouses. He thought he heard the buzz of flies, but the sound was coming from somewhere inside his own head. 'I don't kill for you,' he said, his voice thin and weak.

'You don't have to. I do not demand sacrifices. There is . . . no need. You mortals consecrate any ground you choose, even this alley. You drain a life on to it. Nothing more is required. Not intent, not prayer, nor invocation. I am summoned, without end.'

'What do you want from me?'

'For now, only that you continue harvesting souls. When the time comes for more than that, Gaz of the Gadrobi, you will be shown what must be done.'

'And if I don't want—'

'Your wants are not relevant.'

He couldn't get that infernal buzzing out of his skull. He shook his head, squeezed shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again the god was gone.

*The flies. The flies are in my head. Gods, get out!*

Someone had wandered into the alley, weaving, mumbling, one hand held out to fend off any obstacles.

*I can get them out. Yes!* And, all at once, he knew the truth of that, knew that killing would silence those cursed flies. Swinging round, he pitched forward, hands lifting, and fast-marched towards the drunken fool.

Who looked up at the last moment, in time to meet those terrible knuckles.

*

Krute of Talient slowed as he approached the recessed entrance to the tenement where he now lived. Someone was standing in the shadows, blocking the door. He halted ten paces away. 'That was good work,' he said. 'You was behind me most of the way, making me think you wasn't good at all, but now here you are.'

'Hello, Krute.'

At that voice Krute started, then leaned forward, trying to pierce the gloom. Nothing but a shape, but it was, he concluded, the right shape. 'Gods below, I never thought you'd come back. Do you have any idea what's happened since you vanished?'

'No. Why don't you tell me?'

Krute grinned. 'I can do that, but not out here.'

'You once lived in a better neighbourhood, Krute.'

He watched Rallick Nom step out from the alcove and his grin broadened. 'You ain't changed at all. And yes, I've known better times – and I hate to say it, but you're to blame, Rallick.'

The tall, gaunt assassin turned to study the tenement building. 'You live here? And it's my fault?'

'Come on,' Krute said, 'let's get inside. Top floor, of course, an alley corner – easy to the roof, dark as Hood's armpit. You'll love it.'

A short time later they sat in the larger of the two rooms, a scarred table between them on which sat a stubby candle with a badly smoking wick, and a clay jug of sour ale. The two assassins held tin cups, both of which leaked.

Since pouring the ale, Krute had said nothing, but now he grunted in amused surprise. 'I just thought of something. You showing up, alive and hale, has just done what Krafar couldn't do. We had a cult, Rallick Nom, worshipping the memory of you. Krafar outlawed it in the Guild, then tried to eradicate it – forced us deeper. Not deep enough for me – I'm under suspicion and they've gone and isolated me, like I was already dead. Old contacts . . . look right through me, Rallick. It's been damned hard.'

'Krafar?'

'Seba, Talo's brood. In the squabble over who was gonna take over after Vorcan, he's the one got through unscathed – still breathing, I mean. The Guild's decimated, Rallick. Infighting, lots of good killers getting disgusted and just up and leaving. Down to Elingarth, mostly, with a few to Black Coral, if you can believe that. Even heard rumours that some went to Pale, to join the Malazan Claws.'

Rallick held up a red-stained hand. 'A moment, damn you. What idiot decided on a cult?'

Krute shrugged. 'Just sort of happened, Rallick. Not really worship – that was the wrong word. It's more like a . . . a philosophy. A philosophy of assassination. No magic, for one. Poisons, lots of poisons. And otataral dust if we can get it. But Seba Krafar wants to take us back to all that magic, even though you made it obvious which way was the better one, the surer one. The man's stubborn – it's in the blood with them, eh?' Krute slapped the table, momentarily knocking over the candle, which he hastened to right before the paltry flame went out. 'Can't wait to see Krafar's face when you walk in—'

'You will have to,' Rallick replied. 'Something else, friend. You don't say a word, to anyone.'

Krute smiled knowingly. 'You plan on an ambush, don't you? You, stepping over Krafar's body, to take mastery of the Guild. And you need to make plans – and I can help you there, tell you the ones sure to be loyal to you, sure to back you—'

'Be quiet,' Rallick said. 'There's something you need to know.'

'What?'

'The night I disappeared, recall it?'

'Of course.'

'Someone else vanished that night too.'

Krute blinked. 'Well, yes—'

'And now I am back.'

'You are.'

Rallick drank down a mouthful of ale. Then another.

Krute stared, then swore. 'Her, too?'

'Yes.'

Draining his cup, Krute quickly refilled it, then leaned back. 'Gods below. Poor Krafar. You working with her on this, Rallick?'

'No.'

'Not that she'd need help—'

'I don't know where she is, Krute. I don't know what she's planning. If anything. I don't know, and can't guess, and neither can you.'

'So, what do we do, Rallick?'

'You change nothing, stay with your routine.'

Krute snorted. 'What routine? Slow starvation?'

'I have coin, enough for both of us. Hidden here and there.' Rallick rose. 'I assume the rooftops are quiet these nights.'

'Except for thieves, coming out like mice with not an owl to be seen – like I said, the Guild's on its knees.'

'All right. I will return before dawn. For now, Krute, we do nothing.'

'I'm good at that.'

Rallick grimaced, but said nothing as he turned to the window and unlocked the shutters.

He didn't need to say anything, as far as Krute was concerned. True enough, Krute was good at doing nothing. But Rallick Nom wasn't. He wasn't good at that at all. *Oh, this is going to be fun, isn't it?*

The murmurings chased him down the alley, guttural noises issuing from a score of fanged mouths, tongues wiggling, black lips lifting clear. The glimmer and flash of rolling eyes in the gloom. Looking back over one shoulder, Iskaral Pust, Magus and High Priest of Shadow, bhokaral god, made faces at his worshippers. He cursed them in twitters. He waggled his tongue. He bared his teeth and bulged his eyes.

And did this frighten them off? Why, no! The very opposite, if such madness could be believed. They scrabbled ever closer, still clutching their loot from hapless victims in the markets, their faces writhing in constipated anguish or something equally dire. Infuriating!

'Never mind, never mind *them*. I have tasks, missions, deeds of great import. I have stuff to do.'

And so he hurried on, kicking through rubbish, listening to the creatures behind him kicking through the same rubbish. He paused at each alley mouth, shot quick glances up and down the streets, then darted across to the next opening. In his wake, the bhokarala gathered in a clump at the alley mouths, looked one way, looked the other, and then tore off in pursuit.

A short time later he skidded to a halt, the sound of his heels echoed a moment later by countless claws gouging cobblestones. Iskaral Pust pulled at his hair and whirled. The crouching bhokarala all had their knobby fists up to either side of their tiny skulls.

*'Leave me be!'* he hissed.

They hissed back at him.

He spat.

And was sprayed with gobs of foul saliva.

He beat at his head.

They pounded their own heads with fistfuls of jewellery and globes of fruit.

Eyes narrowing (eyes narrowing), Iskaral Pust slowly stood on one leg. Watched the bhokarala stand tottering on single legs.

'Gods below,' he muttered, 'they've all gone entirely insane.'

Spinning round once more, he glared across at the squat, octagonal temple fifty paces down the street to his right.

Its walls were a chaotic collection of niches and misshapen angles, a veritable plethora of shadows. Iskaral Pust sighed. 'My new abode. A modest hovel, but it suits my needs. I plan to do it up, of course, when there's time. Oh, you like the gold place settings and silk napkins? Just something I threw together, mind, but it pleases me well enough. Spiders? No, no spiders round here, oh, no. Simply not allowed. Ghastly creatures, yes, disgusting. Never bathe, don't you know. Ghastly.'

Wordless singsong at his back.

'Oh, don't mind them. My ex-wife's relations – if I'd have known, well of course I'd never have taken the leap, if you know what I mean. But that's how it is – get married and you end up saddled with the whole family menagerie. And even though she's gone now, nothing but a dried-out husk with her legs sticking up in the air, well, I admit to feeling responsible for her hapless kin. No, no, she looked nothing like them. Worse, actually. I confess to a momentary insanity. The curse of being young, I suppose. When did we get married? Why, four, five years ago now, yes. Only seems like a lifetime and I'm glad, so glad, to be done with it now. More wine, sweetness?'

Smiling, Iskaral Pust set out for the temple.

Shadowed steps, leading to a shadowed landing beneath a pitted lintel stone; oh, this was all very well done. The twin doors were huge, very nearly gates, panelled in polished bronze moulded into an enormous image of charging Hounds. Delicious touch! Lovingly rendered, all that snarling terror.

'Yes, the doors were my idea, by my own hand in fact – I dabble. Sculpture, tapestry, portraiture, caricature, potterature – pottery, I mean, I was simply using the technical term. See this funerary urn, exquisite, yes. She's inside. Yes, my beloved departed, my belovedly departed, my blessedly departed, hee hee – oh, folding up her limbs was no easy task, let me tell you, quite a tight fit. I know, hard to believe she's in there, in an urn barely larger than a jar of wine. I have many skills, yes, as befits the most glorious mortal servant of High House Shadow. But I'll tell you this, she fought hard all the way in!'

He crouched in front of the bronze doors, glowering into the gaping jaws of the Hounds. Reached up one knuckled hand, and rapped Baran's nose.

A faint, hollow reverberation.

'I knew it,' he said, nodding.

The bhokarala fidgeted on the steps, knocking each other on their snouts, then sagely nodding.

The door to the left opened a crack. A hood-shrouded head poked out at about chest height, the face peering up vague and blurry. 'We don't want any,' said a thin, whispery woman's voice.

'You don't want any what?'

'They'll soil the furniture.'

Iskaral Pust scowled. 'She's insane. Why is everyone I meet insane? Listen, wretched acolyte, step aside. Scrape your pimply forehead on the tiles and kiss my precious feet.

I am none other than Iskaral Pust.'

'Who?'

'Iskaral Pust! High Priest of Shadow. Magus of the High House. Our god's most trusted, favoured, valued servant! Now, move aside, let me in! I claim this temple by right of seniority, by right of rightful hierarchy, by right of natural superiority! I will speak with the High Priestess immediately! Wake her up, clean her up, prop her up – whatever you need to do to get her ready for me.'

The door creaked back and all at once the acolyte straightened, revealing herself to be ridiculously tall. She swept her hood back to display an exquisitely moulded face surrounded by long, straight, rust-red hair. In a deep, melodic voice she said, 'I am High Priestess Sordiko Qualm of the Darujhistan Temple of Shadow.'

'Ah, a master of disguise. Just like me.'

'Yes, I can see that.'

'You can?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, isn't that funny.' He tilted his head. 'Not funny at all.' Then smiled winningly up at her. 'And what do you think I am, dear?'

'Some sort of sunburned toad, I believe.'

'Just what I want you to think. Now, invite me in, before

I lose my temperature.'

'Temper, you mean.'

'No, temperature. It's getting chilly.'

Her amber eyes shifted to the steps behind him. 'What of your offspring?'

'Ha ha. Offspring they are not. Never mind them. They can weep, they can whimper, they can grovel, they can—'

'Right now they are all waving their hands about in perfect mimicry of you, Iskaral Pust. Why would they do that?'

'Forget them, I said.'

Shrugging, she stepped back.

Iskaral Pust scrambled inside.

Sordiko Qualm shut the door and locked it. 'Now, you claim to be a High Priest. From where?'

'Seven Cities, the secret monastery.'

'What monastery?'

'The one that's a secret, of course. You don't need to know and I don't need to tell you. Show me to my chambers, I'm tired. And hungry. I want a seven-course supper, plenty of expensive, suitably delicate wine, and nubile female servants eager to appease my delighted whim.'

'I cannot, alas, think of a single servant here who would touch your whim, as you so quaintly call it. As for the rest, let it not be said I am remiss in according fellow seneschals every courtesy as befits a guest of my temple.'

'Your temple, is it?' Iskaral Pust sniggered. 'Not for long, but say nothing at the moment. Leave her such pathetic delusions. Smile, yes, and nod – and how in the Abyss did *they* get inside?'

The bhokarala were now crowding behind the High Priestess, heads bobbing.

She swung about. 'I don't know. There are wards . . . should be impossible. Most disturbing indeed.'

'Never mind,' Iskaral Pust said. 'Lead on, underling.'

One fine eyebrow lifted. 'You claim to be the Magus of High House Shadow – that is quite an assertion. Have you proof?'

'Proof? I am what I am and that is that. Pray, pray. Pray, I mean, do pray and perchance all manner of revelation will afflict you, humble you, reduce you to wondering adoration. Oh,' he added, 'wait until she does just that! Oh, the song will change then, won't it just! Never mind servants servicing my whim, it will be this glorious woman!'

She stared at him a moment longer, then, in a whirl of robes, swung about and gestured that he follow. The grace she no doubt sought was fouled almost immediately as she had to kick and stumble her way through the squall of bhokarala, each of which bared teeth in rollicking but silent laughter. She shot a glance back at Iskaral Pust, but not, he was certain, in time to see his noiseless laugh.

Into the sanctum they went.

'Not long,' Iskaral Pust whispered. 'Those doors need paint, yes. Not long now at all . . .'

'Gods below,' the guard gasped, 'you're bigger than a Barghast!'

Mappo Runt ducked his head, embarrassed that he had so shocked this passing watchman. The guard had staggered back, clutching momentarily at his chest – yes, he was past his prime, but it seemed that the gesture had been just that, a gesture, and the Trell's sudden dread that he had inadvertently sent the first citizen he met stumbling through Hood's Gate slowly gave way to shame. 'I am sorry, sir,' he now said. 'I thought to ask you a question – nothing more.'

The guard lifted his lantern higher between them. 'Are you a demon, then?'

'You regularly encounter demons on your patrols? A truly extraordinary city.'

'Of course not. I mean, it's rare.'

'Ah. I am a Trell, from the plains and hills east of Nemil, which lies west of the Jhag Odhan in Seven Cities.'

'What, then, was your question?'

'I seek the Temple of Burn, sir.'

'I think it best that I escort you there, Trell. You have been keeping to the alleys this night, haven't you?'

'I thought it best.'

'Rightly so. And you and I shall do the same. In any case, you are in the Gadrobi District, while the temple you want is in the Daru District. We have some way to go.'

'You are very generous with your time, sir.'

The guard smiled. 'Trell, you plunging into any crowded street is likely to cause a riot. By taking charge of you, I hope to prevent that. Thus, not generous. Simply doing my duty.'

Mappo bowed again. 'I thank you even so.'

'A moment, while I douse this light, then follow me – closely, please.'

The fete's celebrants in this quarter seemed to be concentrated in the main streets, bathed in the blue glow of the gas lamps. It was not difficult to avoid such places with the watchman guiding him down narrow, twisting and turning alleys and lanes. And those few figures they encountered quickly slunk away upon seeing the guard's uniform (and, perhaps, Mappo's massive bulk).

Until, behind a decrepit tavern of some sort, they came upon two corpses. Swearing under his breath, the guard crouched down beside one, fumbling to relight his lantern. 'This is becoming a problem,' he muttered, as he cranked the wick high and a golden glow filled the area, revealing filth-smeared cobblestones and the gleam of pooled blood. Mappo watched as he rolled over the first body. 'This one's a plain beating. Fists and boots – I knew him, poor man. Losing a battle with spirits . . . well, the battle's over now, Beru bless his soul.' He moved on to the next one. 'Ah, yes. Hood take the one that did this – four others just the same. That we know of. We still cannot fathom the weapon he uses . . . perhaps a shovel handle. Gods, but it's brutal.'

'Sir,' ventured Mappo, 'it seems you have more pressing tasks this night. Directions—' 'No, I will take you, Trell. Both have been dead for a couple of bells now – a little longer won't matter. I think it's time,' he added, straightening, 'for a mage or a priest to be brought into this.'

'I wish you success,' Mappo said.

'I can never figure it,' the guard said as he led the Trell onward. 'It's as if peace is not good enough – someone needs to crawl out of the pit with blood dripping from his hands. Delivering strife. Misery.' He shook his head. 'Could I but shake reason into such abominations. There's no need. No one wants them and no one wants what they do. What's needed? That's what I wish I knew. For them, I mean. What do they need, what do they want? Is it just that sweet sip of power? Domination? The sense of control, over who lives and who dies? Gods, I wish I knew what fills their brains.'

'No, sir,' said Mappo, 'be glad you do not. Even the beasts succumb to such aggression. Killers among your kind, among my kind, are just that – the savagery of beasts mated with intelligence, or what passes for intelligence. They dwell in a murky world, sir, confused and fearful, stained dark with envy and malice. And in the end, they die as they lived. Frightened and alone, with every memory of power revealed as illusion, as farce.'

The guard had halted, had turned to regard the Trell as he spoke. Just beyond the alley's mouth was a wall and, to the left, the unlit cave of a tunnel or a gate. After a moment the man grunted, then led Mappo on, into the reeking passageway through the wall, where the Trell warrior was forced to duck.

'You must be a formidable tribe back in your homeland,' the guard observed, 'if your kin are as big and broad as you are.'

'Alas, we are, generally, not killers, sir. If we had been, perhaps we would have fared better. As it is, the glory of my people has waned.' Mappo then halted and looked back at the gate they had just passed through. He could see that the wall was but a fragment, a stretch no more than fifty paces in length. At both ends leaning buildings thrust into the spaces where it should have continued on.

The guard laughed. 'Aye, not much left of the Gadrobi Wall. Just this one gate, and it's used mostly by thieves and the like. Come, not much further.'

The Temple of Burn had seen better days. Graffiti covered the plain limestone walls, some the blockish list of prayers, others elliptical sigils and

obscure local symbols. A few raw curses, or so Mappo suspected from the efforts made to deface the messages. Rubbish clogged the gutter surrounding the foundations, through which rats ambled.

The guard led him along the wall and to the right, where they came out on to a slightly wider thoroughfare. The temple's formal entrance was a descending set of stairs, down to a landing that looked ankle deep in rainwater. Mappo regarded it in some dismay.

The guard seemed to notice. 'Yes, the cult is fading. She has slept too long, I suppose. I know I have no business asking, but what do you seek here?'

'I am not sure,' Mappo admitted.

'Ah. Well, Burn's blessings on you, then.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The guard set out to retrace his route, no doubt returning to the alley with the corpses. The memory of them remained with Mappo, leaving him with a gnawing disquiet. He had glimpsed something of the mysterious wounds on the second body. Brutal indeed. Would there could be an end to such things, yes. A true blessing of peace.

He made his way down the steps. Splashed through the pool to the doors.

They opened before he could knock.

A gaunt, sad-faced man stood before him. 'You had to know, Mappo Runt of the Trell, that it could not last. You stand before me like a severed limb, and all that you bleed stains the ether, a flow seeming without end.'

'There will be an end,' Mappo replied. 'When I have found him once more.'

'He is not here.'

'I know.'

'Would you walk the veins of the earth, Mappo Runt? Is that why you have come to this temple?'

'Yes.'

'You choose a most perilous path. There is poison. There is bitter cold. Ice, stained with foreign blood. There is fire that blinds those who wield it. There is wind that cries out an eternal death cry. There is darkness and it is crowded. There is grief, more than even you can withstand. There is yielding and that which will not yield. Pressures too vast even for one such as you. Will you still walk Burn's Path, Mappo Runt?'

'I must.'

The sad face looked even sadder. 'I thought as much.

I could have made my list of warnings even longer, you know. We could have stood in our places for the rest of the night, you in that sodden pool, me standing here uttering dire details. And still, at long last, you would say "I must" and we would have wasted all that time. Me hoarse and you asleep on your feet.'

'You sound almost regretful, Priest.'

'Perhaps I am at that. It was a most poetic list.'

'Then by all means record it in full when you write your log of this fell night.'

'I like that notion. Thank you. Now, come inside, and wipe your feet. But hurry – we have been preparing the ritual since your ship docked.'

'The breadth of your knowledge is impressive,' Mappo said as, ducking, he stepped inside.

'Yes, it is. Now, follow me.'

A short corridor, ceiling dripping, into a broader transept, across a dingy mosaic floor, down a second corridor, this one lined with niches, each home to a holy object – misshapen chunks of raw ore, crystals of white, rose and purple quartz and amethyst, starstones, amber, copper, flint and petrified wood and bones. At the end of this passage the corridor opened out into a wider colonnaded main chamber, and here, arrayed in two rows, waited acolytes, each wearing brown robes and holding aloft a torch.

The acolytes chanted in some arcane tongue as the High Priest led Mappo down between the rows.

Where an altar should have been, at the far end, there was instead a crevasse in the floor, as if the very earth had opened up beneath the altar, swallowing it and the dais it stood on. From the fissure rose bitter, hot smoke.

The sad-faced High Priest walked up to its very edge then turned to face Mappo. 'Burn's Gate awaits you, Trell.'

Mappo approached and looked down.

To see molten rock twenty spans below, a seething river sweeping past.

'Of course,' the High Priest said, 'what you see is not in this realm. Were it so, Darujhistan would now be a ball of fire bright as a newborn sun. The caverns of gas and all that.'

'If I jump down there,' Mappo said, 'I will be roasted to a crisp.'

'Yes. I know what you must be thinking.'

'Oh?'

'Some gate.'

'Ah, yes. Accurate enough.'

'You must be armoured against such forces. This is the ritual I mentioned earlier. Are you ready, Mappo Runt?'

'You wish to cast some sort of protective spell on me?'

'No,' he replied, with an expression near to weeping, 'we wish to bathe you in blood.'

*

Barathol Mekhar could see the pain in Scillara's eyes, when they turned inward in a private moment, and he saw how Chaur held himself close to her, protective in some instinctive fashion as might be a dog with a wounded master. When she caught Barathol studying her, she was quick

with a broad smile, and each time he felt as if something struck his heart, like a fist against a closed door. She was indeed a most beautiful woman, the kind of beauty that emerged after a second look, or even a third, unfolding like a dark flower in jungle shadows. The pain in those eyes only deepened his anguish.

Cutter was a damned fool. Yes, there had been another woman – his first love, most likely – but she was gone. Time had come to cut the anchor chain. No one could drown for ever. This was what came of being so young, and deftness with knives was a poor replacement for the skill of surviving everything the world could throw in the way. Longing for what could never be found was pointless, a waste of time.

Barathol had left his longing behind, somewhere in the sands of Seven Cities. A sprawl of motionless bodies, mocking laughter disguised as unceasing wind, a lizard perched like a gift on a senseless black-crusted hand. Moments of madness – oh, long before the madness of the T'lan Imass in Aren – when he had railed at remorseless time, at how *too late* was something that could not be changed – not with blood spilled at the foot of a god, not with a knife poised to carve out his own heart. *Too late* simply grinned at him, lifeless, too poignant for sanity.

Those two words had begun a chant, then stride by stride a gleeful echo, and they had lifted to a roar in the raiders' camp, amidst screams and the clash of iron; lifted, yes, into a deafening maelstrom that crashed inside Barathol's skull, a surging tide with nowhere to go. *Too late* cannot be escaped. It crooned with every failed parry, every failed dodge from a scything weapon. It exploded in eyes as death hammered home, exploded along with blood and fluids. It lunged in the wake of toppling bodies. It scrawled messages (ever the same message) in the sands dying men crawled across.

He could have chanted for ever, but he had left no one alive. Oh, a dozen horses that he gave away to a caravan some days later, a gift for taking in the half-dead warrior, for treating his raging fever, for cleaning his wounds and burning out infection. They would accept no payment for their efforts – they could do nothing for the bleak anguish in his soul, they explained, and

so to ask for anything would be dishonourable. Now a gift, well, that was different.

In the desert nothing disguised time's cruel face. Its skin was stretched to the bone. Its lone eye burned the sky and its gaping mouth was cold and airless as a mountain peak. The traders understood this. They were as much a tribe of the desert as anyone, after all. They gave him bladders of water – enough to take him to the nearest garrison outpost – *'Aye, give the Mezla that – they know how to build waystations and equip them well. They turn no one away, friend.'*

They gave him the strongest of the raiders' horses, a fine saddle, jerked meat and dried fruit. They gave him feed for the mount to last four days and, finally, they showed him the track he would take, the path that cheated death and yes, it was the only one.

Death stalked him, they said. Waited, for now, out beyond the glare of the dung-fires, but when Barathol finally rode out the reaper with the long legs would set out after him, singing of time, singing of the hunger that never ended, never slowed, never did anything but devour all in its path.

*'When longing comes to you, friend, step not into its snare, for longing is the fatal bait – find yourself in its snare and you will be dragged, dragged through all the time allotted you, Barathol Mekhar, and nothing you grasp will remain, all torn from your fingers. All that you see will race past in a blur. All that you taste will be less than a droplet, quickly stripped away. Longing will drag you into the stalker's bony arms, and you will have but a single, last look back, on to your life – a moment of clarity that can only be some unknown god's most bitter gift – and you will understand, all at once, all that you have wasted, all that you let escape, all that you might have had.*

*'Now ride, friend. And 'ware the traps of your mind.'*

Too late. Those two words haunted him, would perhaps for ever haunt him. The cruel chant had filled his head when he'd looked down upon Chaur's drowned face. *Too late!*

But he'd spat into that gleeful cry. That time, yes, he had. He had said *no* and he had won.

Such victories were without measure.

Enough to hold a man up for a while longer. Enough to give him the courage to meet a woman's eyes, to meet unflinching what he saw there . . .

In cavorting, clashing light, faces smeared past as they walked through the crowd. Rollicking songs in the local tongue, jars and flasks thrust at them in drunken generosity. Shouted greetings, strangers in clutches by walls, hands groping beneath disordered clothing. The smell of sex everywhere – Barathol slowed and half turned.

Scillara was laughing. 'You lead us into most unusual places, Barathol. This street called out to you, did it?'

Chaur was staring at the nearest pair, mouth hanging open as his head unconsciously began bobbing in time with their rhythmic thrusts.

'Gods below,' Barathol muttered. 'I wasn't paying much attention.'

'So you say. Of course, you were on that boat for a long time, pretty much alone, I'd wager – unless Spite decided—'

'No,' he cut in firmly. 'Spite decided nothing of the sort.'

'Well then, the city beckons with all its carnal delights! This very street, in fact—'

'Enough of that, please.'

'You can't think I'll ease up on you, Barathol?'

Grimacing, he squinted at Chaur. 'This is disturbing him—'

'It is not! It's exciting him, and why wouldn't it?'

'Scillara, he may have a man's body, but his is a child's mind.'

Her smile went away and she nodded thoughtfully. 'I know. Awkward.'

'Best we leave this,' Barathol said.

'Right. Let us find somewhere to eat supper – we can make plans there. But the issue won't go away, I suspect – he's caught the scent, after all.'

Moving to either side of Chaur, they turned him about and began guiding him away. He resisted briefly, but then fell in step, joining in with a nearby chorus of singers with loud, wordless sounds not quite matching their somewhat better efforts.

'We really are the lost ones, aren't we?' Scillara said. 'We need to find ourselves a purpose . . . in life. Aye, let's grasp our biggest, most glaring flaw, shall we? Never mind what to do tomorrow or the day after. What to do with the rest of our lives, now there's a worthy question.'

He groaned.

'Seriously. If you could have anything, anything at all, Barathol, what would it be?'

*A second chance.* 'There's no point in that question, Scillara. I'll settle for a smithy and a good day's work, each and every day. I'll settle for an honest life.'

'Then that's where we'll start. A list of necessary tasks. Equipment, location, Guild fees and all that.'

She was trying hard, he could see. Trying hard to keep her own feelings away from this moment, and each moment to come, for as long as she could.

*I accept no payment, Scillara, but I will take your gift. And give you one in turn.* 'Very well. I can certainly use your help in all that.'

'Good. Look, there's a crowded courtyard with tables and I see food and people eating. We can stand over a table until the poor fool sitting at it leaves. Shouldn't take long.'

Blend withdrew her bared foot from Picker's crotch and slowly sat straight. 'Be subtle,' she murmured, 'but take a look at the trio that just showed up.'

Picker scowled. 'Do you always have to make me uncomfortable in public, Blend?'

'Don't be silly. You're positively glowing—'

'With embarrassment, yes! And look at Antsy – his face is like a sun-baked crabshell.'

'It's always like that,' Blend said.

'I don't mind,' Antsy said, licking his lips. 'I don't mind at all what you two get up to, in public or in that favourite room you use, the one with the thin walls and creaking floor and ill-fitting door—'

'A door you were supposed to fix,' snapped Picker, only now half turning to take in the newcomers. She flinched, then huddled down over the table. 'Gods below. Now, don't that grizzled one look familiar.'

'I been trying to fix it, honest. I work on it all the time—'

'You work all right, with one eye pressed to the crack,' Blend said. 'You think we don't know you're there, sweating and grunting as you—'

'Be quiet!' Picker hissed. 'Didn't you two hear me? I said—'

'He looks just like Kalam Mekhar, aye,' Antsy said, poking with his knife at the chicken carcass on the platter in the centre of the table. 'But he's not Kalam, is he? Too tall, too big, too friendly-looking.' He frowned and tugged at his moustache. 'Who was it said we should eat here tonight?'

'That bard,' said Picker.

'Our bard?'

'For the rest of the week, aye.'

'He recommended it?'

'He said we should eat here tonight, is what he said. Is that a recommendation? Might be. But maybe not. He's an odd one. Anyway, he said it would be open till dawn.'

'The chicken was too scrawny. And I don't know who they got to pluck the damned thing, but I'm still chewing on feathers.'

'You were supposed to avoid the feet, Antsy,' said Blend. 'They didn't even wash those.'

'Of course they did!' Antsy protested. 'That was sauce—'

'The sauce was red. The stuff on the feet was dark brown. Want something to get embarrassed about, Picker, just drag Antsy along to supper.'

'The feet was the best part,' the Falari said.

'He's Seven Cities for sure,' Picker noted. 'All three of them, I'd wager.'

'The fat one likes her rustleaf.'

'If she's fat, Antsy, then so am I.'

Antsy looked away.

Picker cuffed him on the side of the head.

'Ow, what was that for?'

'I wear armour and quilted underpadding, remember?'

'Well, she's not, is she?'

'She's delicious,' Blend observed. 'And I bet she don't get embarrassed by anything much.'

Picker offered her a sweet smile. 'Why not go stick your foot in and see?'

'Ooh, jealous.'

Antsy sat up, suddenly excited. 'If your legs was long enough, Blend, you could do both! And I could—'

Two knives slammed point first into the table in front of the ex-sergeant. His bushy brows shot upward, eyes bulging. 'Just an idea,' he muttered. 'No reason to get all uppity, you two.'

'Could be he's another Kalam,' Picker said. 'A Claw.'

Antsy choked on something, coughed, hacked, then managed a breath. He leaned forward until he was very nearly lying on the table from the chest

up. He chewed on his moustache for a moment, eyes darting between Picker and Blend. 'Listen, if he is, then we should kill him.'

'Why?'

'Could be he's hunting us, Picker. Could be he's come to finish off the Bridgeburners once and for all.'

'Why would any of them care?' Picker asked.

'Maybe the bard set us up, did you think of that?'

Blend sighed and rose. 'How about I just go up and ask him?'

'You want to take a grab at a tit,' Picker said, smiling again. 'So, go ahead, Blend. Go on. See if she blows you a kiss.'

Shrugging, Blend set out to where the three newcomers had just acquired a table.

Antsy choked again, plucked at Picker's sleeve and gasped, 'She's heading straight over!'

Picker licked her lips. 'I didn't really mean—'

'She's almost there – they seen her – don't turn round!'

Barathol saw the Malazan threading her way to where they now sat. By hue of skin, by cast of features, by any obvious measure one might find, there was nothing that differentiated the woman from any local Daru or Genabarii; yet he knew, instantly. A Malazan, and a veteran. A damned *marine*.

Scillara noted his attention and half turned in her chair. 'Good taste, Barathol – and it seems she likes—'

'Quiet,' Barathol muttered.

The slim woman came up, soft brown eyes fixed on Barathol. And in Malazan, she said, 'I knew Kalam.'

He snorted. 'Yes, he's a popular man.'

'Cousin?'

He shrugged. 'That will do. Are you with the embassy?'

'No. Are you?'

Barathol's eyes narrowed. Then he shook his head. 'We arrived today. I never directly served in your empire.'

She seemed to think about that. Then she nodded. 'We're retired. Causing no trouble to anyone.'

'Sounds retired indeed.'

'We run a bar. K'rul's, in the Estates District, near Worry Gate.'

'And how does it fare?'

'Slow to start, but we're settled in now. Getting by.'

'That's good.'

'Come by, I'll set you the first round.'

'We just might.'

She glanced down at Scillara then, and winked. Then turned away and walked back to her table.

'What just happened?' Scillara asked after a moment.

Barathol smiled. 'Do you mean the wink or all the rest?'

'I figured out the wink, thank you. The rest.'

'They're deserters, I'd wager. Worried that we might be imperial. That I might be a Claw, come to deliver a message from the Empress – the usual message to deserters. They knew Kalam Mekhar, a relation of mine, who was once a Claw, and then a Bridgeburner.'

'A Bridgeburner. I've heard about them. The nastiest company ever. Started in Seven Cities and then left with Dujek.'

'The same.'

'So they thought you were here to kill them.'

'Yes.'

'So one of them just decided to walk up and talk to you. That seems either incredibly brave or profoundly stupid.'

'The former,' said Barathol. 'About what you'd expect from a Bridgeburner, deserter or otherwise.'

Scillara twisted round, quite deliberately, to study the two women and the red-bearded man at the table on the other side of the plaza. And did not flinch from the steady regard they then fixed on her.

Amused, Barathol waited until Scillara slowly swung back and reached for her jar of wine, before saying, 'Speaking of brave . . .'

'Oh, I just don't go for that kowtowing stuff.'

'I know.'

'So do they, now.'

'Right. Shall we join them, then?'

Scillara suddenly grinned. 'Tell you what, let's buy them a pitcher, then watch and see if they drink from it.'

'Gods, woman, you play sharp games.'

'Nah, it's just flirting.'

'With what?'

Her smile broadened, and she gestured over a nearby server.

'Now what?' Antsy demanded.

'Guess they're thirsty,' Picker said.

'It's that quiet one who worries me,' Antsy continued.

'He's got that blank look, like the worst kinda killer.'

'He's a simpleton, Antsy,' said Blend.

'Worst kinda killer there is.'

'Oh, really. He's addled, a child's brain – look how he looks round at everything. Look at that silly grin.'

'It's probably an act, Blend. Tell her, Pick, it's an act. That's your Claw, right there, the one that's gonna kill us starting with me, since I ain't never had no luck, except the pushin' kind. My skin's all clammy already, like I was practising being a corpse. It's no fun, being a corpse – take it from me.'

'That explains the fingernails,' Blend said.

Antsy frowned at her.

The server who had just been at the other table now arrived, delivering a large clay jar. 'Wine,' she said. 'Compliments of them three o'er there.'

Picker snorted. 'Oh, that's cute. And now they want to see if we drink from it. Get that wench back here, Blend. Buy them a bottle of white apricot nectar. Returning the favour, like.'

Blend rolled her eyes. 'This could get expensive,' she said as she rose.

'I ain't drinkin' from nothing I didn't buy myself,' Antsy said. 'We shoulda brought Bluepearl, he could've sniffed out whatever. Or Mallet. They got poisons so secret here there's no taste, no smell, the one drop that kills ya don't even feel wet. Why, all you need to do is *look* in its direction!'

'What in Hood's name are you going on about, Antsy?'

'You heard me, Pick—'

'Pour me some of this wine, then. Let's see if they got good taste.'

'I ain't touching that jar, could be powdered with something—'

'Only if the wench was in on it. If she wasn't and there was, she'd be dead, right?'

'She don't look too healthy to me.'

'You'd look pretty rough too with all the cysts she's got on her head and neck.'

'Some Daru poisons show up as knobby lumps—'

'Gods below, Antsy!' Picker reached across and collected the jar, filled her goblet. Drank down a mouthful of the amber liquid. 'There. Not half bad. We got better in our cellar, I'm pleased to say.'

Antsy was studying her with slightly bulging eyes.

Blend returned, sank into a slouch in her chair. 'On its way,' she said. 'How was the wine, Pick?'

'Passing. Want some?'

'All this trudging back and forth has worked up a fierce thirst, so fill it up, darling.'

'You're both suicidal,' Antsy said.

'We're not the ones feeling clammy, are we?'

'There are some poisons,' Picker said, 'that kill the person next to the one who took it.'

The ex-sergeant lurched back in his chair. 'Damn you – I heard of those – you killed me!'

'Calm down,' Blend interjected. 'She was teasing you, Antsy. Honest. Right, Picker?'

'Well . . .'

'If you don't want his knife in your throat, Pick, tell him quick.'

'Aye, a jibe. A jest. Teasing, nothing more. Besides, if you're naturally clammy, you're immune.'

'You must think me an idiot, Pick. Both of you!' When neither objected to that assertion the Falari snarled and took the jar from Blend, raised it defiantly to his mouth and downed the rest of the contents in a cascade of gulps, his oversized apple bobbing as if he was trying to swallow a cork.

'A fearless idiot,' Blend said, shaking her head.

Antsy sucked on his moustache ends for a moment, then thumped the empty jar on to the tabletop. He belched.

They watched as the wench delivered the bottle of white apricot nectar. A brief conversation with the woman ensued, whereupon she flounced off with a toss of her knobby head. The pleasantly plump woman and the Mekhar both poured a healthy measure of the liquor. With a bold toast in the Malazans' direction, they sipped.

'Look at that,' Blend said, smiling, 'such handsome shades of green.'

And the woman was on her feet, was marching over.

Antsy set a hand on the grip of his shortsword.

In Malazan tainted with the accent of Seven Cities, the woman – with a hard frown – said, 'You trying to kill us or something? That was awful!'

'It gets better,' Blend said with an innocent blink.

'Really? And when would that be?'

'Well, embalmers swear by it.'

The woman snorted. 'Damned Mezla. This is war, you know.' And she spun about and walked, a little unsteadily, back to her table.

The server was simply waiting in the wings, it turned out, as she arrived at the table moments after the Seven Cities woman sank down into her chair. More conversation. Another toss of the head, and off she trundled.

The bottle she showed up with was of exquisite multihued glass, shaped like some giant insect.

'This is for you!' the server snapped. 'And I ain't playing no more no matter how much you tip me. Think I can't work this out? Two women and a man here, one woman and two men o'er there! You are all disgusting and when I tell the manager, well, banning the likes of you won't hurt us none, will it?' A whirl, nose in the air, and a most impressive stalk to the restaurant's nether regions or wherever it was managers squatted in the nervous gloom common to their kind.

The three Malazans said nothing for a long time, each with eyes fixed upon that misshapen bottle.

Then Picker, licking dry lips, asked, 'Male or female?'

'Female,' Antsy said in a thin, grating voice, as if being squeezed from below. 'Should smell . . . sweet.'

Clearing her throat, Blend said, 'They just won the war, didn't they?'

Picker looked at her. 'A damned slaughter, too.'

Antsy moaned. 'We got to drink it, don't we?'

The two women nodded.

'Well,' he said, 'I once plunged straight into a squad of Crimson Guard—'

'You fell out of the tree—'

'—and made it out alive. And I once stood down a charging wild boar—'

'Wasn't wild, Antsy. It was Trotts's pet, and you made a grunt that sounded just like a sow.'

'—and at the last moment I jumped right over it—'

'It threw you into a wall.'

'—so if anyone here's got the guts to start, it's me.' And with that he reached for the bottle of Quorl Milk. Paused to study the sigil on the stopper. 'Green Moranth. The cheap brand. Figures.'

The normal dosage was a thimbleful. Sold exclusively to women who wanted to get pregnant. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't. Maybe all it did was shock the body into pregnancy – anything to avoid another taste of *that* stuff.

Picker drew out a pale handkerchief and waved it over her head. They'd have to offer them rooms now, at least a week's stay, she judged. *Us Mezla just got trounced. Gods, it's about time we met folk worth meeting.*

*Makes it almost worth drinking Quorl Milk.*

Antsy drank down a mouthful then set the bottle down. And promptly passed out. Crumpling like a man without bones, except for his head which crunched audibly on the cobbles.

*Almost worth it.* Sighing, she reached for the bottle. To Blend she said, 'Good thing your foot's been neutered, love.'

'Don't you mean sterile?'

'I ain't that delusional,' Picker replied. 'Be sure they promise to hire us all a carriage, before you drink, Blend.'

'I will. See you tomorrow, sweetie.'

'Aye.'

Crone circled the edge, fixing one eye then the other on the strange apparition swirling above the enchanted dais. The power of the High Alchemist's sorcery was as sweet and intoxicating as the pollen of d'bayang poppies, but that which came from the demon was foul, alien – yet, the Great Raven knew, not quite as alien as it should be. Not to her and her kind, that is.

'You are bold,' she said to Baruk, who stood facing the dais with hands folded. 'And the reach of your power, and will, is most impressive.'

'Thank you,' replied the High Alchemist, squinting at the demon he had conjured and then trapped. 'Our conversations have been . . . most enlightening. Of course, what we see here is not a true physical manifestation. A soul, I believe, disconnected from its corporeal self.'

'With eyes of jade,' Crone noted, beak opening in silent laughter. She hesitated, then asked, 'What has it told you?'

Baruk smiled.

From the mantel above the fireplace Chillbais wheezed derisively and made insulting gestures with its stubby hands.

'You should spike that thing to a wall,' Crone hissed. 'At the very least send it back up the chimney and thus out of my sight.'

Baruk spoke as if he had not heard Crone's complaining: 'Its body is very far away indeed. I was granted an image of the flesh – a human, as far as I could tell, which is in itself rather extraordinary. I was able to capture the soul due to its heightened meditative state, one in which the detachment is very nearly absolute. I doubt the original body draws breath ten times a bell. A most spiritual individual, Crone.'

The Great Raven returned her attention to the apparition. Studied its jade eyes, its jagged traceries of crackling filaments, pulsing like a slowed heart. 'And you know, then,' she said.

'Yes. The demon is from the realm of the Fallen One. His birthplace.'

'Meditating, you say. Seeking its god?'

'That seems likely,' Baruk murmured. 'Reaching, touching . . . recoiling.'

'From the agony, from the ferocious fires of pain.'

'I will send it home, soon.'

Crone half spread her wings and hopped down on to the tiles. Cocking her head, she fixed an eye upon the High Alchemist. 'This is not simple curiosity.'

Baruk blinked, then turned away. 'I had a guest, not so long ago.'

'In truth?'

The High Alchemist paused, then shook his head. 'Halftruth.'

'Did he sit in a chair?'

'Well now, that would hardly be appropriate, Crone.'

She laughed. 'Shadowthrone.'

'Please, do not act surprised,' Baruk said. 'Your master is well aware of such matters. Tell me, where are the rest of them?'

'Them?'

'The gods and goddesses. The ones cringing every time the Crippled God clears his throat. So eager for this war, as long as someone else does the fighting. None of this should be set at your Lord's feet. I don't know what Shadowthrone has offered Anomander Rake, but you would do well to warn your master, Crone. With Shadow, nothing is as it seems. *Nothing.'*

The Great Raven cackled, then said, 'So true, so true.' And now it was his turn, she noted, to regard her with growing suspicion. 'Oh, Baruk, people raise standing stones, one after another, only to topple them down one by one. Is it not always the way? They dig holes only to fill them in again. As for us Great Ravens, why, we build nests only to tear them apart next season, all because the mad lizard in our skulls demands it. See your demon on the dais. It pays nothing to be spiritual, when it is the flesh that ever clamours for attention. So send him back, yes, that he can begin to repair all the severed tendons – whilst his comrades witness the distance of his gaze, and wonder, and yearn to find the same otherworldliness for themselves, fools that they all are.

'Have you exhorted him to pray all the harder, Baruk? I thought as much, but it's no use, I tell you, and who better to make such judgement? And consider this: my master is not blind. He has never been blind. He stands before a towering stone, yes, and would see it toppled. So, old friend, be sure to stay a safe distance.'

'How can I?' the High Alchemist retorted.

'Send the soul home,' Crone said again. 'Look to the threat that even now creeps closer in the night, that is but moments from plucking the strands of your highest wards – to announce her arrival, yes, to evince her . . . desperation.'

She hopped towards the nearest window sill. 'For myself, I must now depart, yes, winging away most quickly.'

'A moment. You have lingered, Crone, in search of something. And it seems you have found it.'

'I have,' she replied, cackling again.

'Well?'

'Only confirmation, to ease my master's mind.'

'Confirmation? Ah, that Shadowthrone spoke true.'

A third cackle from the sill – as threes were ever preferable to pairs, not that Crone was superstitious of course – but if only two, then a third would sound somewhere, and might that one not be at her own expense? Not to be, oh no, not to be! 'Farewell, Baruk!'

Moments after he closed the window in the wake of that oily black-tarred hen, Chillbais lifted his head and cried out: 'She comes! She comes!'

'Yes,' Baruk sighed.

'Deadly woman!'

'Not this time, little one. Fly to Derudan, and quickly.

Tell her, from me, that the one who once hunted us has returned. To discuss matters. Further, Chillbais, invite Derudan to join us as soon as she is able. She will understand, I am sure, the need.'

Chillbais flapped (well, mostly fell) to the floor in front of the fireplace, then scrambled into the embers and vanished up the chimney.

Baruk frowned at the conjured demon spinning above the dais; then, with a single gesture, he released the spirit, watching as the swirling energy dwindled, then winked out. *Go home, lost one. With my blessing.* And then he stood, facing the wall she would come through.

Stood, awaiting Vorcan.

No longer afraid of her.

No, the terror he was feeling belonged instead to her reason for coming. As for the Mistress of Assassins herself, damn but he had harsh words awaiting her.

*You killed the others, woman. All but myself and Derudan. Yes, only the three of us left. Only three.*

*To stop, if we can, the return of the Tyrant.*

*Oh, Vorcan, you toppled far too many stones that night.*

Should he have asked Anomander Rake for help? Gods below, it had been as close to offered him as it could have been, if he understood Crone and he was sure that he did – at least in that matter. And if he chose to accept that offer, should he tell Derudan and Vorcan? How could he not?

Neither would be pleased, he was sure. Especially Vorcan. And their fragile (and yes, it would be most fragile) alliance might die in the very moments of its birth.

*Oh, Baruk, be open, be honest with them both. Ask them. Simple as that.*

Yet, even as he saw the wall before him blurring, seeming to melt, a figure slowly, cautiously stepping through, he knew he would not. Could not.

There were but three of them left, now. Not enough to stop the Tyrant's return. Even with Rake's help . . . not enough.

*Which means one of us will choose to betray the others. Currying favour for when He returns. Favour, well. Bargaining to stay alive would be more accurate.*

*One of us will betray the others.*

*Maybe Derudan. Maybe this one here.*

*Gods, maybe me.*

He stood thirty paces up the street. Beneath the hood his eyes held unwavering on the ill-lit entrance to the Phoenix Inn. On the old steps, on the tattered sign still hanging misaligned above the inset door. For a hundred heartbeats he had watched, as figures entered, others left – no one as yet familiar to him, as if in his absence all that he had known had vanished, melted away, and now strangers sat where he had once sat. Held tankards he had once held. Smiled at the servers and flung out over-familiar suggestions as they swayed past.

Cutter imagined himself inside, imagined the resentment there on his face as he looked upon a score or more intruders, invaders into his own memories, each one crowding him, trying to push him out. And on, to whatever new life he had found, which was not in the Phoenix Inn. Not even in Darujhistan.

There was no returning. He had known that all along, at least intellectually, but only now, as he stood here, did the full realization descend upon him, a burden of such emotion that he felt crushed by it. And was it not equally true that the man behind the eyes was not the same man from those years past? How could he not see it differently, with all that he had been through, with all that he had seen and felt?

His heart thundered in his chest. Each drumming thud, he now understood, was, once done, never to return. Even the repetition was in truth nothing but an illusion, a sleight of similitude. It might be a comfort to pretend that the machinery never changed, that each pulse and swirl was identical, that a man could leap back and then forward in his mind and no matter where he ended up all that he saw would remain the same. Fixed like certainty.

The rough stones of the dank walls. The quality of the yellow light bleeding from the pitted glass window. Even the susurration of sound, the voices, the clank of pewter and fired clay, the very laughter spilling out as the door was opened, spilling out sour as bile as far as Cutter was concerned.

Who was left in there that he might recognize? The faces tugged a little older, shoulders a fraction more hunched, eyes framed in the wrinkled map of the weary. Would they light upon seeing him? Would they even know him? And even then, after the slapped backs and embraces, would he see something gauging come into their eyes, painting colourless their words, a certain distance widening with every drawn-out moment that followed?

The faintest scrape of a boot two paces behind him. Spinning round, ducking low as he did so, daggers flashing in both hands. Left blade half raised, point downward, into a guard position. Right blade darting out in a stopthrust—

—and the figure leaned back with a soft grunt of surprise, tjaluk knife snapping out from beneath a cloak to block the dagger—

Cutter twisted his wrist to fold into that parry, flicking his blade's edge into a deep slice across the base of the attacker's gloved palm, even as he lunged forward – staying low – and slashed his left-hand dagger for the indent beneath his foe's right kneecap.

Avoiding that attack very nearly toppled the man straight into Cutter's arms, but Cutter had already slipped past, slicing both blades for thigh, then hip, as he darted by on the man's left.

Amazingly, that heavy tjaluk caught every slash – and another of the oversized, hooked knives now appeared in the man's other hand, straightening in a back-flung stop-thrust in case Cutter pivoted round to take him from behind. Cutter was forced to pitch hard to evade that damned fend, and, balanced on one leg, he threw the dagger in his left hand, side-arm, launching the weapon straight for the man's shadowed face—

Sparks as – impossibly – the man batted the flying weapon aside.

A new knife already in that hand, Cutter made to launch yet another attack – then he skidded on his heels and leaned back into an all-out defence as the man came forward, his heavy knives whirling a skein before him.

*Two of those? Two?*

'Wait!' Cutter cried out. 'Wait! Rallick? *Rallick?'*

The tjaluks withdrew. Blood spattered down from the one in the right hand – where the palm had been laid open.

Dark eyes glittered from beneath the hood.

'Rallick – it's me. Cut— Crokus! Crokus Younghand!'

'As I'd first thought,' came the rumbling reply, 'only to change my mind, in a hurry. But now, yes, it is you. Older – gods, I have indeed been away a long time.'

'I cut your hand – I'm sorry—'

'Not half as sorry as me, Crokus. You are in the Guild now, aren't you? Who has trained you? Not Seba Krafar, that's for sure. I don't recognize the style at all—'

'What? No, no Guild. Not anything like that, Rallick. I've been – wait, you said you've been gone? From Darujhistan? Where? How long? Not since that night behind Coll's? But—'

'Aye,' Rallick cut in, 'it's you all right.'

'Gods below,' Cutter said, 'but it's so good to see you, Rallick Nom. I mean, if I'd known it was you at first – you shouldn't come up on a man from behind like that. I could've killed you!'

The assassin stood studying him.

Suddenly trembling, Cutter sheathed his knives, then began looking around for the one he'd thrown. 'Two of those pig-choppers – who else would use those? I should've realized when I saw the first one. I'm so sorry, Rallick. Instincts took over. They just . . . took over.'

'You did not heed my warning, then.'

Years ago, those dark, angry words, but Cutter did not need to ask *what warning?* He remembered it all too well. 'I would have,' he said, pausing in his search. 'Truly, Rallick. I went with the Malazans, you see, and Apsalar. Fiddler, Kalam, the four of us, to Seven Cities. Where everything . . . changed.'

'When did you return, Crokus?'

'Today. Tonight.' He glanced ruefully at the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. 'I've not even gone inside yet. It's . . . changed – aye, that word is already starting to haunt me.' He resumed his hunt. 'I suppose I should have expected it – where in Hood's name did that knife go, dammit?'

Rallick leaned back against a wall. 'The one you aimed at my throat?'

'Yes – I'm so—'

'Yes, you're sorry. Well, you won't find it down there. Try my left shoulder.'

'Oh, the thickness of blood! Darujhistan and her hundred thousand hearts and each and every one beats for none other than this hale, most generous resident of the Phoenix Inn! Seated here at this most grand of tables – although surely Meese should attend to this wobbly leg – nay, not mine, though that would be delicious indeed and well beyond common service in said establishment – with – where was Kruppe? Oh yes, with nary fell company to jiggle awake the night! Tell prescient Kruppe, yon friends, why the glowing faces belied by fretful eyes? Did Kruppe not promise boons galore? Pressures eased? Panics prevented? Purses packed with precious baubles all aglitter? Drink up – oh, humble apologies, we shall order more anon, 'tis a promise most pertinent should one elect to toast this, that and, perchance, t'other!'

'We got news,' Scorch said, looking surprised by his own words, 'and if you'd just shut your trap, you'd hear about it too.'

'News! Why, Kruppe is news personified. Details, analysis, reactions from common folk in the street, all in the blink of an eye and the puff of a single breath, who needs more? This new madness we must witness now weekly and all the bolts of burlap wasted on which some purple fool blathers all manner of foul gossip, why, 'tis nothing but rags for the ragman, or wipes for the arsewipes or indeed blots for the blotters bless their feminine wiles – Kruppe rails at this elevation of circumstance and incidence! A profession, the fops now claim, as if baying hounds need certification to justify their slavering barks and snarls! Whatever happened to common decency? To decent commonry? What's decent is rarely common – that is true enough, while the obverse is perverse in all prickly irony, would you not agree? Kruppe would, being such an agreeable sort—'

'We found Torvald Nom!'

Kruppe blinked at Leff, then at Scorch, then – seeing perhaps the disbelief mirrored in the face of the latter – back to Leff. 'Extraordinary! And did you horribly hand him over to hirsute Gareb the Lender?'

Scorch growled under his breath.

'We worked out a better deal,' said Leff, licking his lips. 'Torvald will pay Gareb back, in full, and, you see, to do so he had to pay *us* for the privilege, right? So, Torvald pays us, Gareb pays us. We get paid twice!' Kruppe lifted one pudgy finger – on which, he saw with momentary dismay, there was a smear of something unrecognizable – 'A moment, please. Torvald has both returned and, bought you off? Then why is it Kruppe buying the drinks this night? Ah, allow Kruppe to answer his own question! Why, because Torvald *is yet* to pay off trusting Leff and Scorch, yes? He begged, yes, for one night. One night! And all would be well and such!'

'How'd you guess?'

Kruppe smiled. 'Dear foolish friends, should Gareb hear of this any time soon – should he, yes, learn that you had the notorious Torvald Nom in your very grasp, why, you will find your names on the very list you hold, thus forcing you to turn in yourselves to great reward, which will avail you nothing when Gareb hides and quarters poor Scorch and Leff. Ah, calamities await!'

'Torvald Nom was once our partner,' said Leff, though now sweating in earnest. 'He gave us his word, he did. And if he goes back on it, well, doing wrong to Scorch and Leff is never a good idea, for anybody. So you keep that in mind, too, Kruppe, if you go blabbing to Gareb or some such thing.'

'Beru forbid. Kruppe would do no such thing, dearest temperamental friends! Nay, Kruppe's fear relates back to those new rags abounding in the grubby hands of urchins at every street corner these days, such a plague upon Darujhistan! Said rags are nefariously quick and diabolical with their gossip, and who can know the multitude of dubious sources? Kruppe worries what the morrow's rag will proclaim!'

'Damned well better proclaim nothing,' snarled Scorch, looking terrified and belligerent all at once.

'Now, blessed friends,' Kruppe said with a perfunctory but flourished wave of his hands, 'we must end this debacle for tonight! Dread circumstance hovers. Kruppe senses stupendous events imminently . . .

imminent. A taste upon the air, a flutter in the wind, a flicker in the lantern light, a waver in watery pools of ale, a thump upon the stairs . . . a rattling exposure of front doors – ho! Noms and flowers! Knives and bleeders! Faces most ashen and dismayed! Begone from Kruppe's table, recent wumplings of desultory concourse! Reunion most precious awaits!'

Rallick was leaning heavily against Cutter by the time they reached the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. *Gods, if I've killed him – my friend – gods, no —*

Pushing open the door he half dragged Rallick inside.

And saw, behind the counter, Meese. Beyond her, Irilta. And there, to his left, frozen in mid-step and staring with wide eyes—

'Sulty! Rallick's hurt – we need a room – and help—'

All at once Meese was pulling the assassin from Cutter's arms. 'Hood's breath, he's cut to pieces!'

'I'm sorry—' Cutter began.

But Irilta was now there, taking his face between hands that smelled of ale and chopped garlic. Lips suddenly looming large as she planted a full kiss on his mouth, tongue briefly writhing in like a worm down a hole.

Cutter reeled back, then found Sulty in his arms, grasping him tight – tight with arms astonishingly strong after a dozen or so years of trays and pitchers – so tight all the air was pushed from his lungs.

'He'll live,' pronounced Meese from where she crouched over Rallick, who was lying on the floor behind the counter. 'Once we stop the bleeding. He musta been jumped by three or four, by the looks.' Straightening, she dropped the bloody dagger on the counter. A crowd was gathering, and heads now tilted in for a closer look at that foreign-made weapon.

'Malazan!' hissed someone.

Pulling himself from Sulty's arms, Cutter pushed through. 'Give me room! Don't touch that knife! It's mine.'

'Yours?' demanded Irilta. 'What's that supposed t'mean, Crokus?'

'He came up on me from behind – all quiet – like a killer. I thought I was defending myself – it was all a mistake – you sure he's going to be all right, Meese?'

'You was that scrawny thief years back!' said a man with a vaguely familiar face, his expression flitting between disbelief and accusation.

'Crokus, Irilta said,' added the man beside him. 'Did something the night the Moon came down, I heard. Knocked over a pillar or something. You remember, Scorch, don't you?'

'I make a point of remembering only what I need to, Leff. Though sometimes other stuff sticks, too. Anyway, he was a pickpocket, one of Kruppe's lads.'

'Well he ain't any more, is he?' Leff said in a half-snarl. 'Now he's a Guild assassin!'

'No I'm not!' shouted Cutter – all at once feeling like the ungainly youth he had been years ago. Furious at his own burning face he swung to Meese. 'Where's everybody else? I mean—'

Meese held up a hand – on which there was some of Rallick's blood – and said, 'He's waiting, Crokus. At his usual table – go on. Hey,' she shouted to the crowd, 'give him a way through! Go back t'your tables!'

Just like that, Cutter reflected, he had made things a shambles. His grand return. Everything. Reaching out as he passed, he retrieved his knife – not meeting Meese's eyes as he did so. Then, as bodies pulled back, he saw—

There, at his usual table, the small round man with greasy hair and beaming, cherubic smile. Filthy frilly cuffs, a faded and stained red waistcoat. A glistening pitcher on the puddled tabletop, two tankards.

*Just a thief. A pickpocket. A raider of girls' bedrooms. Wasn't I the breathless one? A wide-eyed fool. Oh, Kruppe, look at you. If anybody wasn't going to change, it's you.*

Cutter found himself at the table, collapsing into the waiting chair, reaching for the tankard. 'I gave up on my old name, Kruppe. It's now Cutter. Better suited, don't you think?' *Then why do I feel like weeping?* 'Especially after what I did to Rallick just now.'

Kruppe's brows lifted. 'Kruppe sympathizes, oh yes he does. Life stumbles on – although the exception is none other than Kruppe himself, for whom life *dances*. Extraordinary, how such truth rubs so many so wrongly; why, can one's very existence prove sufficient for such inimical outrage? Seems it can, oh yes, most certainly. There are always those, dear friend, for whom a wink is an insult, a smile a taunt. For whom humour alone is cause for suspicion, as if laughter was sly contempt. Tell Kruppe, dear Cutter, do you believe that we are all equal?'

'Equal? Well—'

'A laudable notion, we can both agree, yes? Yet' – and he raised one rather unclean finger – 'is it not true that, from one year to the next, we each ourselves are capable of changes so fundamental that our present selves can in no reasonable way be considered equal to our past selves? If the rule does not apply even within our own individual lives, how can one dare hope to believe that it pertains collectively?'

'Kruppe, what has all this—'

'Years past, Cutter who was once named Crokus, we would not have a discussion such as this, yes? Kruppe sees and sees very well. He sees sorrow and wisdom both.

Pain and still open wounds. Love found and love lost. A certain desperation that still spins like a coin – which way will it fall? Question as yet unanswered, a future as yet undecided. So, old friend now returned, let us drink, thus yielding the next few moments to companionable silence.' And with that Kruppe collected his tankard and lifted it high.

Sighing, Cutter did the same.

'The spinning coin!'

And he blanched. 'Gods below, Kruppe!'

'Drink, friend! Drink deep the unknown and unknowable future!'

And so he did.

The wheel had stopped spinning, milky water dripping down its sides to gather in the gutter surrounding it. The bright lanterns had been turned well down, sinking the room into soft light, and she now walked towards her bed, drying her hands with a towel.

In a day or two she would fire up the kiln.

It was late and this was no time to be thinking the heavy, turgid thoughts that now threatened to reach up and take hold of her weary mind. Regret has a flavour and it is stale, and all the cups of tea in the world could do nothing to wash it away.

The scratching at the door brought her round – some drunk at the wrong house, no doubt. She was in no mood to answer.

Now knuckles, tapping with muted urgency.

Tiserra tossed the towel down, rubbed absently at her aching wrist, then collected one of the heavier stirring sticks from the glaze table and approached the door. 'Wrong house,' she said loudly. 'Go on, now!'

A fist thumped.

Raising the stick, Tiserra unlatched the door and swung it back.

The man stepping on to the threshold was wearing a stupid grin.

One she knew well, had known for years, although it had been some time since she had last seen it. Lowering the stick, she sighed. 'Torvald Nom. You're late.'

'Sorry, love,' he replied. 'I got waylaid. Slavers. Ocean voyages. Toblakai, dhenrabi, torture and crucifixion, a sinking ship.'

'I had no idea going out for a loaf of bread could be so dangerous.'

'Well,' he said, 'the whole mess started with me hearing about a debt. One I didn't know I had. That bastard Gareb set me up, said I owed him when I

didn't, but that's not something one can argue, not without an advocate – which we couldn't afford—'

'I know all about Gareb,' Tiserra replied. 'His thugs visited here often enough once you disappeared, and yes, I did need an advocate – to get Gareb to back off.'

'He was threatening you?'

'He claimed that your debt was my debt, dear husband. Of course that's nonsense. Even after I won that challenge, he had me followed around. For months. Suspected you were in hiding somewhere and I was delivering food and the like, I suppose. I can't tell you how much fun that was. Why can't I, Torvald? Because it wasn't. Fun, that is. Not fun at all.'

'I'm home now,' Torvald said, trying the smile again. 'Wealthy, too. No more debt – I'm clearing that in the morning, straight away. And no more low-grade temper for your clay either. And a complete replenishment of your herbs, tinctures and such – speaking of which, just to be safe we should probably put together a ritual or two—'

'Oh, really? You've been stealing again, haven't you? Tripped a few wards, did you? Got a bag of coins all glowing with magic, have you?'

'And gems and diamonds. It was only proper, love, honest. A wrongful debt dealt with wrongfully, the two happily cancelling each other out, leaving everything rightful!'

She snorted, then stepped back and let him inside. 'I don't believe I'm buying all this.'

'You know I never lie to you, Tis. Never.'

'So who did you rob tonight?'

'Why, Gareb, of course. Cleaned him out, in fact.'

Tiserra stared at him. 'Oh, husband.'

'I know, I'm a genius. Now, about those wards – as soon as he can, he'll bring in some mages to sniff out the whereabouts of his loot.'

'Yes, Torvald, I grasp the situation well enough. You know where the secret hole is – drop the bag in there, if you please, while I get started on the rest.'

But he had not moved. 'Still love me?' he asked.

Tiserra turned and met his eyes. 'Always, y'damned fool. Now hurry.'

Glories unending this night in Darujhistan! And now the dawn stirs awake, a light to sweep aside the blue glow of the unsleeping city. See the revellers stumbling towards their beds or the beds of newfound friends or even a stranger's bed, what matter the provenance of love? What matter the tangled threads of friendship so stretched and knotted?

What matter the burdens of life, when the sun blazes into the sky and the gulls stir from their posts in the bay, when crabs scuttle for deep and dark waters? Not every path is well trod, dearest friends, not every path is set out with even pavestones and unambiguous signs.

Rest eyes in the manner of a thief who is a thief no longer, as he looks with deepest compassion down upon the sleeping face of an old friend, there in a small room on the upper floor of the Phoenix Inn; and sees too a noble councilman snoring slouched in yon chair. While in the very next room sits an assassin who is, perhaps, an assassin no longer, dull-eyed with pain as he ponders all manner of things, in fashions sure to be mysterious and startling, were any able to peek into his dark mind.

Elsewhere, a child long ago abandoned by his mother frets in his sleep, pursued by a nightmare face with the absurd name of Snell attached to it.

And two guards run, hearts pounding, from the gate to the estate as alarms ring loud and urgent, for an evil man has lost all his ill-won wealth – a fact as sure to pluck his talons as a torturer's pliers, since evil only thrives in a well of power, and when the coin of cruelty is stolen away, why, so too vanishes the power.

A fingerless man stumbles home, god-blessed and blood oozing from battered knuckles, while his wife sleeps without dreams, her expression so peaceful even the most unsentimental sculptor could do naught but weep.

And, in a street unworthy of any particular notice, stands an ox, thinking about breakfast. What else is there, after all, when love and friendship and power, and regret and loss and reunion fierce enough to tear away all that might have been bittersweet, when all – *all* – is gone and done with, what else is there, but the needs of the stomach?

Eat! Dine on pleasures and taste sweet life!

Inconsequential? Bah!

As Kruppe ever says, it is a wise ox that gets the yoke.

# CHAPTER SIX

'The miracle of hindsight is how it transforms great military geniuses of the past into incompetent idiots, and incompetent idiots of the present into great military geniuses. There is the door, and be sure to take all your pompous second-guessing delusions with you . . .'

Emperor Kellanved
On the occasion of the conquest of
Falari's Grand Council (the Trial of Crust)

There had been an earthquake. A spine of rock nearly a league long had simply dropped away, opening an inlet to the sea. There were no silts churned up by this cataclysm, for the spine was a lifeless conglomeration of obsidian and pumice, legacy of past eruptions. At its apex, the inlet was sharply angled, the sides sheer rock. That angle widened on its way out to the sea, flanked at the mouth by twin upthrusts of rock a quarter-league apart.

The inlet's floor was inclined. The water at the apex was no more than fifteen spans deep, crystal clear, revealing a jumble of blockish stones and white bones cluttering the bottom – remnants of tholos tombs and the K'Chain Che'Malle that had been interred within them.

Ruins were visible on both sides of the cut, including a mostly toppled Jaghut tower. In the sky above a tortured rack of hills, just to the north, hovered the stain of a gate, a mottled scar in the air itself. All that bled from it now was pain, a sour, unyielding stench that seemed as thirsty as the ravaged landscape stretching out on all sides.

Traveller stood staring up at the gate for a long time. Two days now from the spot where he had washed up and he had yet to find fresh water. The blood of the bear that had attacked him had sustained him for a time, but that had been salty nectar, and now he suffered.

There had been enough conspiracies intent on achieving his death, over the course of his life thus far, to have made a lesser man long since despair, tumbling into madness or suicide in one last surrender to the hunger of gods and mortals. It would be, perhaps, rather just if he was to fail now for lack of the most basic staples needed to keep one alive.

But he would not surrender, for he could hear a god's laughter, as ironic as a loving whisper in his ear. Somewhere inland, he was sure, this blasted waste would crumble into sweeps of dusty earth, and then grasses, a wind-stirred prairie and steppes. If only he could hold on long enough to reach it.

He had skinned the bear and now carried the hide in a wrapped bundle slung from one shoulder. Although not particularly attractive, it provided a scent disguising his own, and one that would send most carnivores

scurrying. Conversely, he would need to stalk game – assuming he ever found any – from upwind, but that would have been true even without the skin.

He was on the coast of Morn. Far from where he had intended to make landfall here on the Genabackan continent. A long walk awaited him, but there was nothing new in that prospect. Nor, he had to admit, in the threat of failure.

Facing inland, Traveller set out, boots crunching on black, bubbled glass. The morning sun reflected from the mottled surface in blinding flashes, and the heat swirled up around him until he was sheathed in sweat. He could see the far end, a few thousand paces distant – or thought he could, knowing well how the eyes could be deceived – a darker stretch, like a raised beach of black sand drawn across the horizon, with nothing visible beyond.

Some time later he was certain that the ridge was not an illusion. A wind-banked, undulating heap of crushed obsidian, a diamond glitter that cut into his eyes. As he drew closer, he thought he could hear faint moaning, as of some as yet unfelt wind. And now he could see beyond, another vast stretch of featureless plain, with no end visible through the shimmering heat.

Ascending the rise, boots sinking deep into the sand, Traveller heard the moaning wind once more, and he looked up to see that something had appeared on the plain directly ahead. A high-backed throne, the figure seated upon it a blurred cast of shadows. Standing perhaps ten paces to the right was a second figure, this one wrapped in a dark grey cloak, the hood pulled back to reveal a wind-burned profile and a shock of black hair cut short.

From behind the throne now emerged Hounds, padding forward, their paws kicking up puffs of dust that drifted in their wake. Baran, Gear, Blind. Shan and Rood and two others Traveller had never seen before. Bone-white, both of them, with onyx eyes. Leaner than the others, longer-necked, and covered in scars that displayed a startling dark blue skin beneath the short white hair. Moving as a pair, they ranged out to the far right – inland – and lifted noses to the air. The other Hounds came straight for Traveller.

He walked down to meet them.

Shan was the first to arrive, pulling up along one side, then slinking like a cat around his back to come up on the other. He settled his left hand on her sleek black neck.

Ancient Baran was next, and Traveller reached out to set his other hand against one muscled cheek, feeling the skein of seamed scars from centuries of savage combat, the hint of crushing molars beneath the ragged but soft skin. Looking into the beast's light brown eyes, he found he could not hold the gaze for long – too much sorrow, too much longing for peace for which he could give no benison. Baran leaned his head into that caress, and then rasped a thick tongue against Traveller's forearm.

With the huge beasts all round him now – excepting the two white ones – Traveller approached the throne. As he drew nearer, Cotillion finally faced him.

'You look terrible, old friend.'

Traveller smiled, not bothering to respond in kind.

Cotillion's face betrayed exhaustion, beyond anything he had ever seen when the man had been mortal, when he had been named Dancer, when he had shared the rule of an empire. Where were the gifts of godhood? What was their value, when to grasp each one was to flinch in pain and leak blood from the hands?

'You two,' Traveller said, eyes settling now on Shadowthrone, 'banish my every regret.'

'That won't last, I'm sure,' hissed the god on his throne.

'Where is your army, First Sword? I see only dust in your wake.'

'While you sit here, claiming dominion over a wasteland.'

'Enough of the mutual appreciation. You are beset, old friend – hee hee, how often do I use those words, eh? Old friends, oh, where are they now? How far fallen? Scattered to the winds, stumbling hopelessly unguided and blind—'

'You never had that many friends, Kellanved.'

'Beset, I was saying. By nightfall you will be dead of dehydration – it is four days or more to the first spring on the Lamatath Plain.'

'I see.'

'Of course, no matter where you happen to be when you finally die, *your* old friend is bound to come find you.'

'Yes, I am sure he will.'

'To gloat in victory.'

'Hood does not gloat.'

'Well, that's a disappointing notion. So, he will come to not gloat, then. No matter. The point is, *you will have lost.'*

'And my success or lack thereof matters to you, Kellanved?'

Cotillion replied. 'Surprisingly, yes it does.'

'Why?'

That blunt question seemed to take both gods aback for a moment. Then Shadowthrone snorted. 'Does it matter? Hardly. Not at all, in fact. We are here to help you, you damned oaf. You stubborn, obstinate, belligerent fool. Why I ever considered you an old friend entirely escapes me! You are too stupid to have been one, ever! Look, even Cotillion is exasperated by your dimwittedness.'

'Mostly amused, actually,' Cotillion corrected, now grinning at Traveller. 'I was just reminded of our, ah, discussions in the command tent when on campaign. Perhaps the most telling truth of old friendships is in how their dynamics never change.'

'Including your smarmy postulations,' said Shadowthrone drily. 'Listen, you, Traveller or however you call yourself now. My Hounds will guide you to your salvation – hah, how often has that been said? In the meantime, we will give you skins of water, dried fruit and the like – the myriad irritating needs of mortality, I seem to recall. Vaguely. Whatever.'

'And what do you seek in return for this gift?'

A dozen heartbeats passed with no reply forthcoming.

Traveller's face slowly descended into a dangerous frown. 'I will not be swayed from my task. Not even delayed—'

'No, of course not.' Shadowthrone waved an ephemeral hand. 'The very opposite, in fact. We urge you. We exhort you. Make haste, set true your course, seek out your confrontation. Let nothing and no one stand in your way.'

Traveller's frown deepened.

A soft laugh from Cotillion. 'No need. He speaks true, First Sword. It is our pleasure to enable you, in this particular matter.'

'I will not bargain with him.'

'We know.'

'I am not sure you fully understand—'

'We do.'

'I mean to kill Hood. I mean to kill the God of Death.'

'Best of luck to you!' said Shadowthrone.

More silence.

Cotillion then came forward, carrying supplies that had not been there a moment ago. He set them down. 'Shan will lead the way,' he said quietly, stepping back.

Traveller glanced over at the two new Hounds. 'And those ones?'

Cotillion followed his gaze, looking momentarily troubled before he shrugged. 'Hard to say. They just sort'f . . . showed up—'

'I summoned them, of course!' said Shadowthrone. 'The white one is named Pallid. The whiter one is named Lock. Seven is the desired number, the necessary number.'

'Shadowthrone,' Cotillion said, 'you did not summon them.'

'I must have! Why else would they be here? I'm sure I did, at some point. A wish, perhaps, whilst staring upward at the stars. Or a desire, yes, of such overwhelming power that even the Abyss could not deny me!'

'The others seem to have accepted them,' Cotillion noted, shrugging again.

'Has it occurred to you,' said Traveller, softly, to the god standing before him, 'that they might be the fabled Hounds of Light?'

'Really? Why would you think that?' And in that moment, when Cotillion met his eyes and winked, all the exhaustion – the very immortality of ascendancy itself – vanished, and Traveller saw once more – after what seemed a lifetime – the man he had once called his friend.

Yet he could not bring himself to smile, to yield any response at all to that gesture and the invitation it offered. He could not afford such . . . weakness. Not now, perhaps never again. Certainly, not with what these two old friends had become. *They are gods, and gods are not to be trusted.*

Reaching down, he collected the skins and the knapsack. 'Which one drove the bear to the coast?' he asked.

'Gear. You needed food, or you would not have got even this far.'

'I was very nearly its supper, Cotillion.'

'We have always had faith in you, First Sword.'

The next – and probably last – question Traveller had for the god was the most difficult one to voice. 'And which of you wrecked my ship and killed my crew?'

Cotillion's brows lifted. 'Not us. Dassem, we would not do that.'

Traveller studied the god's eyes – always softer than one might have expected, but he had long since grown used to that – and then he turned away. 'All right.'

Pallid and Lock fell in as reluctant, desultory rearguard as the Hounds escorted Traveller inland. Shadowthrone had managed to turn his throne

round so that he could watch the First Sword and his entourage slowly dwindle into the northeast.

Standing nearby, Cotillion lifted his hands and looked down upon the palms, seeing the glistening sweat pooling there. 'That was close.'

'Eh? What was?'

'If he had decided we were behind the shipwreck, well, I don't like to think what would have happened here.'

'Simple, Cotillion. He would have killed us.'

'And the Hounds would not have interceded.'

'Except perhaps my newest pets! No old loyalties there! Hee hee!'

'Close,' said Cotillion again.

'You could have just told him the truth. That Mael wanted him and wanted him badly. That we had to reach in and drag him out – he would have been far more thankful with all that.'

'Gratitude is a useless luxury in this instance, Shadowthrone. No distractions, remember? Nothing and no one to turn Traveller from his fated destiny. Leave Mael for another time.'

'Yes, very good. A detail we can offer Traveller when our need for him is immediate and, er, pressing. We delved, following the suggestion he set us this day, in this place, and lo! Why, none other than the Elder God of the Seas was to blame! Now get over here and draw that damned sword and hack these enemies to pieces!'

'That is not the delving we need to do right now,' Cotillion said.

'Well, of course not. We already know! What need delving?'

Cotillion faced Shadowthrone. 'Mael could have killed him easily enough, don't you think? Instead, he set out to *delay* Traveller. We need to think on that. We need to figure out why.'

'Yes, I am beginning to see. Suspicions awakened – I was momentarily careless, unmindful. Delay, yes, why? What value?'

'I just realized something.'

'What? Quick, tell me!'

'It doesn't matter what Mael had in mind. It won't work.'

'Explain!'

'Mael assumes a quarry on the run, after all . . .'

'Yes, he must, of course, no other possibility. Mael doesn't get it! The idiot! Hee hee! Now, let's get out of this ash-heap, my throat's getting sore.'

Cotillion stared after the Hounds and their charge, squinting against the bright sunlight. 'Timing, Shadowthrone . . .'

'Perfection.'

'So far.'

'We will not fail.'

'We'd better not.'

'Which among our newfound allies do you imagine the weak link?'

Cotillion glanced back at Shadowthrone. 'Well, *you*, of course.'

'Apart from me, I mean.'

Cotillion stared. Shadowthrone waited. Fidgeting on his throne.

Midnight at the lone tavern of Morsko provided Nimander with memories he would never lose. Slack-eyed, black-mouthed villagers staggering forward, colliding with him and the others. Stained bottles thrust into their faces. Eyes smeared with something murky and yellowed. The drink was potent enough to numb tongues, if the exhorting moans were in truth invitations to imbibe.

Even without Clip's earlier warning, Nimander was not inclined to accept such hospitality; nor, he saw with some relief, were any of his kin. They

stood, still crowded at the entrance, bemused and uneasy. The pungent air of the low-ceilinged chamber was sweet, overlying strains of acrid sweat and something like living decay.

Skintick moved up alongside Nimander and they both watched as Clip – Desra at his side – made his way to the counter. 'A simple jug of wine? Anywhere in this place? Not likely.'

Nimander suspected Skintick was right. All he could see, at every table, in every hand, was the same long-necked flask with its blackened mouth.

The moans were louder now, cacophonous like the lowing of beasts in an abattoir. Nimander saw one man – an ancient, bent, emaciated creature – topple face first on to the wood-slatted floor, audibly smashing his nose. Someone close by stepped back, crushing the hapless man's fingers under a heel.

'So, where is the priest?' Nenanda asked from behind Nimander and Skintick. 'It was his invitation, after all.'

'For once, Nenanda,' Skintick said without turning, 'I am pleased to have you standing here, hand on sword. I don't like this.'

'None here can hurt us,' Nenanda pronounced, yet his tone made it plain he was pleased by Skintick's words. 'Listen to me,' he said, 'while Clip is not close by – he holds us all in contempt.'

Nimander slowly turned round, as Skintick said, 'We'd noticed. What do you make of that, brother?'

'He sees what he chooses to see.'

Nimander saw that Kedeviss and Aranatha were listening, and the faint doe-like expression on the latter's face was suddenly gone, replaced by a chilling emptiness that Nimander knew well. 'It is no matter,' Nimander said, sudden sweat prickling awake beneath his clothes. 'Leave it, Nenanda. It is no matter.'

'But it is,' Nenanda retorted. 'He needs to know. Why we survived our battles, when all the others fell. He needs to *understand.'*

'That's over with, now,' Nimander insisted.

'No,' said Skintick, 'Nenanda is right this time, Nimander. He is right. Clip wants to take us to this dying god, after all. Whatever he plans disregards us, as if we did not exist. Voiceless—'

'Useless,' cut in Nenanda.

Nimander looked away. More villagers were collapsing, and those on the floorboards had begun twitching, writhing in pools of their own waste. Sightless eyes rolled ecstatically in sunken sockets. 'If I have made us . . . voiceless, I am sorry.'

'Enough of that rubbish,' Skintick said conversationally.

'I agree,' said Nenanda. 'I didn't before – I was angry with you, Nimander, for not telling this so-called Mortal Sword of Darkness. Telling him about us, who we were. What we've been through. So I tried to do it myself, but it's no use. Clip doesn't listen. Not to anyone but himself.'

'What of Desra?' Nimander asked.

Nenanda snorted. 'She covets her own mystery.'

That was a sharp observation from Nenanda, surprising Nimander. But it was not an answer to what he had meant with his question.

Skintick, however, understood. 'She remains one of us, Nimander. When the need arrives, you need not doubt her loyalty.'

Kedeviss spoke then, with dry contempt. 'Loyalty is not one of Desra's virtues, brothers. Set no weight upon it.'

Skintick sounded amused when he asked, 'Which of Desra's virtues *should* we set weight upon, then, Kedeviss?'

'When it comes to self-preservation,' she replied, 'Desra's judgement is precise. Never wrong, in fact. She makes surviving the result of profound clarity – Desra sees better and sharper than any of us. *That* is her virtue.'

Clip was on his way back, Desra now clinging to his left arm as might a woman struggling against terror.

'The Dying God is about to arrive,' Clip said. He had put away his chain and rings, and from his palpable unease there now rose, like a dark cloud, the promise of violence. 'You should all leave. I don't want to have to cover you, if this turns bad. I won't have the time, nor will I accept blame if you start dying. So, for all our sakes, get out of here.'

It was, Nimander would recall later, the moment when he could have stepped forward, could have looked into Clip's eyes, unwavering, revealing his own defiance and the promise behind it. Instead, he turned to the others. 'Let's go,' he said.

Nenanda's eyes widened, a muscle twitching one cheek. Then he spun about and marched out of the tavern.

With an expression that might have been shame, Skintick reached out to prise Desra away from Clip, then guided her out. Aranatha met Nimander's eyes and nodded – but the meaning of the gesture eluded him, given the vast emptiness in her eyes – then she and Kedeviss exited the taproom.

Leaving Nimander and Clip.

'It pleases me,' said Clip, 'that you take orders as well as you do, Nimander. And that the others still choose to listen to you. Not,' he added, 'that I think that will last much longer.'

'Do not confront this dying god,' Nimander said. 'Not here, not now.'

'Excellent advice. I have no intention of doing so. I simply would see it.'

'And if it is not pleased at being seen by one such as you, Clip?'

He grinned. 'Why do you think I sent you to safety? Now, go, Nimander. Back to our rooms. Comfort your frightened rabbits.'

Outside, beneath a glorious sweep of bright stars, Nimander found his kin in a tight huddle in the centre of the main street. *Rabbits? Yes, it might look that way.* From the tavern they could hear the frenzied moaning reach a fierce pitch, and the sound was now echoing, seeming to roll back in from the hills and fields surrounding the village.

'Do you hear that?' Skintick asked. 'Nimander? Do you hear it? The scarecrows – they are singing.'

*'Mother Dark*,' breathed Kedeviss in horror.

'I want to see one of those fields,' Skintick suddenly said. 'Now. Who is with me?'

When no one spoke, Nimander said, 'You and me, Skintick. The rest to our rooms – Nenanda, stand vigil until we return.'

Nimander and Skintick watched as Nenanda purposefully led the others away.

Then they set out into a side alley, feet thumping on the dusty, hard-packed ground. Another voice had joined all the others, emerging from the temple, a cry of escalating pain, a cry of such suffering that Nimander staggered, his legs like water beneath him. He saw Skintick stumble, fall on to his knees, then push himself upright once more.

Tears squeezed from his eyes, Nimander forced himself to follow.

Old house gardens to either side, filled with abandoned yokes, ploughs and other tools, the furrows overgrown with weeds like bleached hair in the starlight. *Gods, they've stopped eating. All is in the drink. It feeds them even as it kills them.*

That sepulchral wail was dwindling now, but it would rise again, he knew, with the next breath. Midnight in the tavern, the foul nectar was drunk down, and the god in terrible pain was summoned – the gate to his tormented soul forced open. Fed by immortal pain, the prostrate worshippers spasmed in ecstasy – he could see their blackened mouths, the writhing black tongues, the eyes in their smudge-pits; he could see that old man with the smashed nose and the broken fingers—

And Clip remained inside. Witness to the madness, to its twisted face, and when the eyes opened and fixed on his own—

'Hurry,' groaned Nimander as he came up against Skintick, but as he moved past his cousin reached out and grasped hold of his tunic, drawing

Nimander to a halt.

They were at the edge of a field.

Before them, in the cold silver light, the rows of scarecrows were all in motion, limbs writhing like gauze-wrapped serpents or blind worms. Black blood was streaming down. The flowers of the horrid plants had opened, exuding clouds of pollen that flashed like phosphorescence, riding the currents of night air.

And Nimander wanted to rush into that field, into the midst of the crucified victims. He wanted to taste that pollen on his tongue, on the back of his throat. *He wanted to dance in the god's pain.*

Skintick, weeping, was dragging him back – though it seemed he was fighting his own battle, so taut were his muscles, so contradictory their efforts that they fell against one another. On to the ground.

Clawing on their bellies now, back down the dirt track.

The pollen – *the pollen is in the air. We have breathed it, and now – gods below – now we hunger for more.* Another terrible shriek, the voice a physical thing, trying to climb into the sky – but there was nothing to grasp, no handholds, no footholds, and so it shot out to the sides, closing icy cold grips upon throats. And a voice, screaming into their faces.

*You dance! You drink deep my agony! What manner of vermin are you? Cease! Leave me! Release me!*

A thousand footsteps charging through Nimander's brain, dancers unending, unable to stop even had they wanted to, which they did not, no, let it go on, and on – gods, for ever!

There, in the trap of his mind, he saw the old man and his blood- and nectar-smeared face, saw the joy in the eyes, saw the suppleness of his limbs, his straightened back – every crippling knob and protuberance gone. Tumours vanished. He danced in the crowd, one with all the others, exalted and lost in that exaltation.

Nimander realized that he and Skintick had reached the main street. As the god's second cry died away, some sanity crept back into his mind. He pushed himself on to his feet, dragging Skintick up with him. Together, they ran, staggering, headlong for the inn – did salvation beckon? Or had Nenanda and the others fallen as well? Were they now dancing in the fields, selves torn away, flung into that black, turgid river?

A third cry, yet more powerful, more demanding.

Nimander fell, pulled down by Skintick's weight. Too late – they would turn about, rise, set out for the field – the pain held him in its deadly, delicious embrace – too late, now—

He heard the inn's door slam open behind them.

Then Aranatha was there, blank-eyed, dark skin almost blue, reaching down to grasp them both by their cloaks. The strength she kept hidden was unveiled suddenly, and they were being dragged towards the door – where more hands took them, tugged them inside—

And all at once the compulsion vanished.

Gasping, Nimander found himself lying on his back, staring up at Kedeviss's face, wondering at her calculating, thoughtful expression.

A cough from Skintick at his side. *'Mother Dark save us!'*

'Not her,' said Kedeviss. 'Just Aranatha.'

*Aranatha, who flinches at shadows, ducks beneath the cry of a hunting hawk. She hides her other self behind a wall no power can surmount. Hides it. Until it's needed.*

Yes, he could feel her now, an emanation of will filling the entire chamber. Assailed, but holding. As it would.

*As it must.*

Another cough from Skintick. 'Oh, dear . . .'

And Nimander understood. Clip was out there. Clip, face to face with the Dying God. Unprotected.

*Mortal Sword of Darkness. Is that protection enough?* But he feared it was not. Feared it, because he did not believe Clip was the Mortal Sword of anything. He faced Skintick. 'What do we do?'

'I don't know. He may already be . . . lost.'

Nimander glanced over at Aranatha. 'Can we make it to the tavern?'

She shook her head.

'We should never have left him,' announced Nenanda.

'Don't be an idiot,' Kedeviss snapped.

Skintick still sat on the floor, clawing periodically at his face, wracked with shivers. 'What manner of sorcery afflicts this place? How can a god's blood do this?'

Nimander shook his head. 'I have never heard of anything like what is happening here, Skintick. The Dying God. It bleeds *poison*.' He struggled to keep from weeping. Everything seemed stretched thin, moments from tearing to pieces, a reality all at once in tatters, whipped away on mad winds.

Skintick's sigh was ragged. 'Poison. Then why do I thirst for more?'

There was no answer for that. *Is this a truth made manifest? Do we all feed on the pain of others? Do we laugh and dance upon suffering, simply because it is not our own? Can such a thing become addictive? An insatiable need?*

All at once the distant moaning changed pitch, became screams. Terrible, raw – the sounds of slaughter. Nenanda was suddenly at the door, his sword out.

'Wait!' cried Kedeviss. 'Listen! That's not *him*. That's *them*! He's murdering them all – do you want to help, Nenanda? Do you?'

Nenanda seemed to slump. He stepped back, shaken, lost.

The shrieks did not last long. And when the last one wavered, sank into silence, even the Dying God's cries had stilled. Beyond the door of the inn,

there was nothing, as if the village – the entire outside world – had been torn away.

Inside, none slept. Each had pulled away from the others, coveting naught but their own thoughts, listening only to the all too familiar voice that was a soul's conversation with itself. On the faces of his kin, Nimander saw, there was dull shock, a bleakness to the staring, unseeing eyes. He felt the surrender of Aranatha's will, her power, as the threat passed, as she withdrew once more so far inward that her expression grew slack, almost lifeless, the shy, skittering look not ready to awaken once more.

Desra stood at the window, the inside shutters pulled to either side, staring out upon an empty main street as the night crawled on, leaving Nimander to wonder at the nature of her internal dialogue – if such a thing existed, if she was not just a creature of sensation, riding currents of instinct, every choice re-framed into simple demands of necessity.

*'There is cruelty in your thoughts.'*

Phaed. *Leave me alone, ghost.*

*'Don't get me wrong. I approve. Desra is a slut. She has a slut's brain, the kind that confuses giving with taking, gift with loss, invitation with surrender. She is power's whore, Nimander, and so she stands there, waiting to see him, waiting to see this strutting murderer that she would take to her bed. Confusions, yes. Death with life. Desperation with celebration. Fear with need and lust with love.'*

*Go away.*

*'But you don't really want* that*, because then it would leave you vulnerable to that other voice in your head. The sweet woman murmuring all those endearing words – do I recall ever hearing such when she was alive?'*

*Stop.*

*'In the cage of your imagination, blissfully immune to all that was real – the cruel indifferences, yes – you make so much of so little, Nimander. A*

*chance smile. A look. In your cage she lies in your arms, and this is the purest love, isn't it? Unsullied, eternal—'*

*Stop, Phaed. You know nothing. You were too young, too self-obsessed, to see anything of anyone else, unless it threatened you.*

*'And she was not a threat?'*

*You never wanted me that way – don't be absurd, ghost. Don't invent—*

*'I invent nothing! You were just too blinded to see what was right in front of you! And did she die at the spear of a Tiste Edur? Did she truly? Where was I at that moment, Nimander? Do you recall seeing me at all?'*

No, this was too much.

But she would not relent. *'Why do you think the idea of killing Sandalath was so easy for me? My hands were already stained—'*

*Stop!*

Laughter, ringing through his head.

He willed himself to say nothing, waited for those chilling peals of mirth to dwindle, grow ever fainter.

When she spoke again in his mind there was no humour at all in her tone. *'Nenanda wants to replace you. He wants the command you possess, the respect the others hold for you. He will take it, when he sees his chance. Do not trust him, Nimander. Strike first. A knife in the back – just as you acted to stop me, so you must do again, and this time you cannot fail. There will be no Withal there to finish the task. You will have to do it yourself.'*

Nimander lifted his gaze, looked upon Nenanda, the straight back, the hand resting on pommel. *No, you are lying.*

*'Delude yourself if you must – but not for much longer. The luxury must be short-lived. You will need to show your . . . decisiveness, and soon.'*

*And how many more kin do you want to see dead, Phaed?*

*'My games are done with. You ended them once and for all. You and the swordsmith. Hate me if you will, but I have talents, and I gift them to you, Nimander – you were the only one to ever listen to me, the only one to whom I opened my heart—'*

*Heart? That vile pool of spite you so loved to swim in – that was your heart?*

*'You need me. I give strength where you are weakest. Oh, make the bitch murmur of love, fill her mouth with all the right words. If it helps. But she cannot help you with the hard choices a leader must make. Nenanda believes he can do better – see it in his eyes, so quick to challenge.'*

'It's growing light,' Desra said from the window. She turned. 'I think we should go out. To the tavern. It may be he is wounded. It may be he needs our help.'

'I recall him not asking for it,' growled Nenanda.

'He is not all-powerful,' said Desra, 'though he might affect such – it comes with being so young.'

Nimander stared across at her. Where did that insight come from?

'Clip is vulnerable?' Kedeviss asked in mock surprise. 'Be quick to take advantage of that, Desra.'

'The endless siege that is your envy grows wearisome, Kedeviss.'

Kedeviss paled at that and said nothing.

*Oh, we are a vicious bunch, are we not?* Nimander rubbed at his face, then said, 'Let's go, then, and see for ourselves what has become of him.'

Desra was first through the door.

Out into pale silvery light, a cerulean sky devoid of clouds, looking somehow speckled with grit. The harvested plants drooped in their racks, sodden with dew, the bulbs like swollen heads lined up in rows above the latticework. Nimander saw, as he paused out on the street, that the temple's doors were ajar.

Clip was lying on the wooden sidewalk in front of the tavern, curled up, so covered in dried blood that he might have been a figure moulded in black mud.

They set out towards him.

Clip's eyes were open, staring – Nimander wondered if he was dead, until he saw the slow rise and fall of his chest – but showing no awareness of anything, even as they closed round him, even as Nimander knelt in front of him.

Skintick moved up to the tavern doors, pushed them open and stepped inside. He staggered out a moment later, both hands covering his face as he stumbled out into the middle of the street and stood there, back to the others.

*Slaughter. He slaughtered them all.* Clip's sword was lying nearby, thick with gore, as if the entire weapon had been dragged through some enormous beast.

'They took something from him,' Aranatha said. 'Gone. Gone away.'

Nenanda broke into a jog, straight for the temple opposite.

'Gone for good?' Nimander asked Aranatha.

'I don't know.'

'How long can he live this way?'

She shook her head. 'Force food and water into him, keep his wounds clean . . .'

Long moments when no one spoke, when it seemed not a single question could be found, could be cleaned off and uttered in the name of normality.

Nenanda returned. 'They've fled, the priests, all fled. Where was the Dying God supposed to be?'

'A place named Bastion,' said Kedeviss. 'West of here, I think.'

'We need to go there,' Nimander said, straightening to face the others.

Nenanda bared his teeth. 'To avenge him.'

'To get him back,' Nimander retorted. 'To get back to him whatever they took.'

Aranatha sighed. 'Nimander . . .'

'No, we go to Bastion. Nenanda, see if there're any horses, or better yet, an ox and wagon – there was a large stable behind the inn.' He looked down at Clip. 'I don't think we have the time to walk.'

As the three women set out to collect the party's gear, followed for the moment by Nenanda, Nimander turned to study the tavern's entrance. He hesitated – even from here he could see something: dark sprawled shapes, toppled chairs; and now the buzz of flies spun out from the gloom within.

'Don't,' said Skintick behind him. 'Nimander. Don't.'

'I have seen dead people before.'

'Not like these.'

'Why?'

'They are all smiling.'

Nimander faced his closest friend, studied his ravaged face, and then nodded. After a moment he asked, 'What made the priests flee?'

'Aranatha, I think,' answered Skintick.

Nimander nodded, believing the same. They had taken Clip – even with all the dead villagers, the priests had taken Clip, perhaps his very soul, as a gift to the Dying God. But they could do nothing against the rest of them – not while Aranatha resisted. Fearing retribution, they fled in the night – away, probably to Bastion, to the protection of their god.

'Nimander,' said Skintick in a low, hollow voice, 'we are forced.'

'Yes.'

'Awakened once more.'

'Yes.'

'I had hoped . . . never again.'

*I know, Skintick. You would rather smile and jest, as befits your blessed nature. Instead, the face you will turn towards what is to come . . . it will be no different from ours, and have we not all looked upon one another in those times? Have we not seen the mirrors we became to each other? Have we not recoiled?*

Awakened.

What lay in the tavern was only the beginning. Merely Clip and his momentary, failing frenzy.

*From this point on, what comes belongs to us.*

To that, even Phaed was silent. While somewhere in the mists of his mind, so faint as to be almost lost, a woman wept.

It was a quirk of blind optimism that held that someone broken could, in time, heal, could reassemble all the pieces and emerge whole, perhaps even stronger for the ordeal. Certainly wiser, for what else could be the reward for suffering? The notion that did not sit well, with anyone, was that one so broken might remain that way – neither dying (and so removing the egregious example of failure from all mortal eyes) nor improving. A ruined soul should not be stubborn, should not cling to what was clearly a miserable existence.

Friends recoil. Acquaintances drift away. And the one who fell finds a solitary world, a place where no refuge could be found from loneliness when loneliness was the true reward of surviving for ever maimed, for ever weakened. Yet who would not choose that fate, when the alternative was pity?

Of course, pity was a virtually extinct sentiment among the Tiste Andii, and this Endest Silann saw as a rare blessing among his kind. He could not have suffered such regard for very long. As for the torment of his memories, well, it was truly extraordinary how long one could weather that

assault. Yet he knew he was not unique in this matter – it was the burden of his entire people, after all. Sufficient to mitigate his loneliness? Perhaps.

Darkness had been silent for so long now, his dreams of hearing the whisper of his realm – of his birthplace – were less than ashes. It was no wonder, then, was it, that he now sat in the gloom of his chamber, sheathed in sweat, each trickle seeming to drink all warmth from his flesh. Yes, they had manifested Kurald Galain here in this city, an act of collective will. Yet it was a faceless power – Mother Dark had left them, and no amount of desire on their part could change that.

*So, then, what is this?*

*Who speaks with such power?*

Not a whisper but a shout, a cry that bristled with . . . what? *With affront. Indignation. Outrage. Who is this?*

He knew that he was not alone in sensing this assault – others must be feeling it, throughout Black Coral. Every Tiste Andii probably sat or stood motionless at this moment, heart pounding, eyes wide with fear and wonder. And, perhaps, *hope*.

Could it be?

He thought to visit the temple, to hear from the High Priestess herself . . . something, a pronouncement, a recognition proclaimed. Instead, he found himself staggering out of his room, hurrying up the corridor, and then ascending the stairs, round and round as if caught in a swirling fever. Out into his Lord's south-facing demesne – stumbling in to find Anomander Rake seated in his high-backed chair, facing the elongated window and, far below, crashing seas painted black and silver as deep, unknown currents thrashed.

'My Lord,' Endest gasped.

'Did I have a choice?' Anomander Rake asked, gaze still on the distant tumult.

'My Lord?'

'Kharkanas. Did you agree with her . . . assessment? Endest Silann? Did I not see true what was to come? Before Light's arrival, we were in a civil war. Vulnerable to the forces soon to be born. Without the blood of Tiamatha, I could never have enforced . . . peace. Unification.'

'Sire,' said Endest Silann, then found he could not go on.

Rake seemed to understand, for he sighed and said, 'Yes, a most dubious peace. For so many, the peace of death. As for unification, well, that proved woefully shortlived, did it not? Still, I wonder, if I had succeeded – truly succeeded – would that have changed her mind?'

'My Lord – something is happening.'

'Yes.'

'What must we do?'

'Ah, my friend, you are right to ask that. Never mind the High Priestess and her answer – always the same one with her, yes? Who cries the war cry of Kurald Galain? Let us seek the answer between her legs. Even that can grow tiresome, eventually. Although do not repeat my words to Spinnock Durav – I would not disaffect his occasional pleasure.'

Endest Silann wanted to shriek, wanted to lunge against his Lord, grasp him by the neck, and force out – force out what? He did not know. The Son of Darkness was, to his mind, the smartest creature – mortal, immortal, it mattered not – that he had ever met. His thoughts travelled a thousand tracks simultaneously, and no conversation with him could be predicted, no path deemed certain.

'I cannot give answer this time,' Anomander Rake then said. 'Nor, I am afraid, can Spinnock. He will be needed . . . elsewhere.' And now his head turned, and his eyes fixed upon Endest Silann. 'It must fall to you, again. Once more.'

Endest felt his soul recoil in horror, shrink back into whatever cave it had clawed out for itself somewhere down in the mined-out pit of his heart. 'Sire, I cannot.'

Anomander seemed to consider that for a time, ten thousand tracks danced across, on to something new that triggered faint surprise on his features. And he smiled. 'I understand. I will not ask again, then.'

'Then . . . then what – who? Sire – I do not—'

The wryness of Anomander Rake's tone jarred terribly with his words, 'Reborn into fury, oh, would that I could see that.' Then his voice grew sober. 'You were right – you cannot stand in my stead. Do not intercede in any way, Endest Silann. Do not set yourself between two forces, neither of which you can withstand. You may well feel the need, but defy it with all your will. You must not be lost.'

'Sire, I do not understand.'

But Anomander Rake raised one hand.

And yes, the emanation was gone. Darkness was silent once more. Whatever had come into their world had vanished.

Endest found he was trembling. 'Will – will it return, my Lord?'

The Son of Darkness studied him with strangely veiled eyes, then rose and walked over to the window. 'Look, the seas grow calm once more. A most worthy lesson, I think. Nothing lasts for ever. Not violence, not peace. Not sorrow, old friend, nor rage. Look well upon this black sea, Endest Silann, in the nights ahead. To calm your fears. To offer you guidance.'

And, just like that, he knew he was dismissed.

Bemused, frightened of a future he knew he was not intelligent enough to yet comprehend, he bowed, then departed. Corridors and stairs, and not so much as an echo remained. He recalled an old prayer, the one whispered before battle.

*Let Darkness receive my every breath*
*With her own.*

*Let our lives speak in answer unto death*
*Never alone.*

But now, at this moment, he had never felt *more* alone. The warriors no longer voiced that prayer, he well knew. Darkness did not wait to receive a breath, nor the last breath that bridged life and death. A Tiste Andii warrior fought in silence, and when he or she fell, they fell alone. More profoundly alone than anyone who was not Tiste Andii could comprehend.

A new vision entered his head then, jarring him, halting him halfway down the stairs. The High Priestess, back arching, crying out in ecstasy – or desperation, was there truly a difference?

Her search. Her answer that was no answer at all.

*Yes, she speaks for us, does she not?*

'He is troubled,' Salind murmured, only now shaking off the violent cold that had gripped her. 'The Redeemer stirred awake then, for some reason unknown and, to us, unknowable. But I felt him. He is most troubled . . .'

The half-dozen pilgrims gathered round the fire all nodded, although none possessed her percipience in these matters, too bound up still in the confused obstinacy of mortality's incessant demands, and, of course, there was the dread, now, the one that had stalked them every moment since the Benighted's abandonment, an abandonment they saw as a turning away, which was deemed just, because none there had proved worthy of Seerdomin and the protection he offered. Yes, he was right in denying them. They had all failed him. In some way as yet undetermined.

Salind understood all these notions, and even, to some extent – this alone surprising given her few years – comprehended the nature of self-abnegation that could give rise to them. People in great need were quick to find blame in themselves, quick to assume the burden of guilt for things they in truth had no control over and could not hope to change. It was, she had begun to understand, integral to the very nature of belief, of faith. A need that could not be answered by the self was then given over to someone or something greater than oneself, and this form of surrender was a lifting of a vast, terrible weight.

In faith could be found release. Relief.

*And so this enormous contradiction is laid bare. The believers yield all, into the arms of the Redeemer – who by his very nature can release nothing, can find nothing in the way of relief, and so can never surrender.*

*Where then the Redeemer's reward?*

Such questions were not for her. Perhaps indeed they were beyond answering. For now, there was before her a mundane concern, of the most sordid kind. A dozen ex-soldiers, probably from the Pannion Tenebrii, now terrorized the pilgrim encampment. Robbing the new arrivals before they could set their treasures upon the barrow. There had been beatings, and now a rape.

This informal gathering, presumably the camp's representatives, had sought her out, pleading for help, but what could she say to them? *We were wrong to believe in the Benighted. I am sorry. He was not what we thought he was. He looked into my eyes and he refused. I am sorry. I cannot help you.*

'You say the Redeemer is troubled, Priestess,' said the spokesman, a wiry middle-aged man who had once been a merchant in Capustan – fleeing west before the siege, a refugee in Saltoan who had seen with his own eyes the Expulsion, the night when the advance agents of the Pannion Domin were driven out of that city. He had been among the first of the pilgrims to arrive at the Great Barrow and now it seemed he would stay, perhaps for the rest of his life. Whatever wealth he had once possessed was now part of the barrow, now a gift to a god who had been a man, a man he had once seen with his own eyes. 'Surely this is because of Gradithan and his thugs. The Redeemer was a soldier in his life. Will he not reach out and smite those who prey upon his followers?'

Salind held out her hands, palms up. 'Friend, we do not converse. My only gift is this . . . sensitivity. But I do not believe that the source of the Redeemer's disquiet lies in the deeds of Gradithan and his cohorts. There was a burgeoning of . . . something. Not close at hand, yet of such power to make the ether tremble.' She hesitated, then said, 'It had the flavour of Kurald Galain – the warren of the Tiste Andii. And,' she frowned,

'something else that I have felt before. Many times, in fact. As if a storm raged far to the south, one that returns again and again.'

Blank faces stared at her.

Salind sighed. 'See the clouds roll in from the sea – can we halt their progress? Can we – any of us – drive back the winds and rain, the hail? No. Such forces are far above us, far beyond our reach, and they rage as they will, fighting wars in the heavens. This, my friends, is what I am feeling – when something ripples through the ether, when a storm awakens to the south, when the Redeemer shifts uneasy and is troubled.'

'Then we are nothing to him,' said the merchant, sorrow brimming in his eyes. 'I surrendered everything, all my wealth, for yet another indifferent god. If he cannot protect us, what is the point?'

She wished that she had an answer to such questions. Were these not the very grist of priestly endeavours? To grind out palatable answers, to hint of promising paths to true salvation? To show a benign countenance gifted by god-given wisdom, glowing as if fanned by sacred breath? 'It is my feeling,' she said, haltingly, 'that a faith that delivers perfect answers to every question is not a true faith, for its only purpose is to satisfy, to ease the mind and so end its questing.' She held up a hand to still the objections she saw awakened among these six honest, serious believers. 'Is it for faith to deliver peace, when on all sides inequity thrives? For it shall indeed thrive, when the blessed walk past blissfully blind, content in their own moral purity, in the peace filling their souls. Oh, you might then reach out a hand to the wretched by the roadside, offering them your own footprints, and you may see the blessed burgeon in number, grow into a multitude, until you are as an army. But there will be, will ever be, those who turn away from your hand. The ones who quest because it is in their nature to quest, who fear the seduction of self-satisfaction, who mistrust easy answers. Are these ones then to be your enemy? Does the army grow angered now? Does it strike out at the unbelievers? Does it crush them underfoot?

'My friends, is this not describing the terror this land has just survived?' Her eyes fixed on the merchant. 'Is this not what destroyed Capustan? Is

this not what the rulers of Saltoan so violently rejected when they drove out the Pannion monks? Is this not what the Redeemer died fighting against?'

'None of this,' growled a woman, 'eases my daughter's pain. She was raped, and now there is nothing to be seen in her eyes. She has fled herself and may never return.

Gradithan took her and destroyed her. Will he escape all punishment for such a thing? He laughed at me, when I picked up my daughter. When I stood before him with her limp in my arms, *he laughed at me.'*

'The Benighted must return,' said the merchant. 'He must defend us. He must explain to us how we failed him.'

Salind studied the faces before her, seeing the fear and the anger, the pain and the growing despair. It was not in her to turn them away, yet what could she do? She did not ask to become a priestess – she was not quite sure how it even happened. And what of her own pain? Her own broken history? What of the flesh she had once taken into her mouth? Not the bloody meat of a stranger, no. The First Born of the Tenescowri, Children of the Dead Seed, ah, they were to be special, yes, so special – willing to eat their own kin, and was that not proof of how special they were? What, then, of the terrible need that had brought *her* here?

'You must go to him,' said the merchant. 'We know where to find him, in Black Coral – I can lead you to him, Priestess. Together, we will demand his help – he was a Seerdomin, a chosen sword of the tyrant. *He owes us! He owes us all!'*

'I have tried—'

'I will help you,' insisted the merchant. 'I will show him our desire to mend our ways. To accord the Benighted the proper respect.'

Others nodded, and the merchant took this in and went on, 'We will help. All of us here, we will stand with you, Priestess. Once he is made to understand what is happening, once we confront him – there in that damned tavern with that damned Tiste Andii he games with – how can he turn away from us yet again?'

*But what of fairness? What of Seerdomin and his own wounds? See the zeal in your fellows – see it in yourself, then ask: where is my compassion when I stand before him, shouting my demands?*

*Why will none of you defend yourselves?*

'Priestess!'

'Very well.' And she rose, drawing her woollen robe tight about herself. 'Lead on, then, merchant, to where he may be found.'

A man huddled against the counter, sneezing fiercely enough to loosen his teeth, and while this barrage went on none at the table attempted to speak. Hands reached for tankards, kelyk glistened on lips and eyes shone murky and fixed with intent upon the field of battle.

Spinnock Durav waited for Seerdomin to make a move, to attempt something unexpected in the shoring up of his buckling defences – the man was always good for a surprise or two, a flash of tactical genius that could well halt Spinnock in his tracks, even make him stagger. And was this not the very heart of the contest, its bright hint of glory?

The sneezing fit ended – something that, evidently, came of too much kelyk. A sudden flux of the sinuses, followed by an alarmingly dark discharge – he'd begun to see stains, on walls and pavestones and cobbles, all over the city now. This foreign drink was outselling even ale and wine. And among the drinkers there were now emerging abusers, stumbling glaze-eyed, mouths hanging, tongues like black worms. As yet, Spinnock had not seen such among the Tiste Andii, but perhaps it was only a matter of time.

He sipped at his cup of wine, pleased to note that the trembling in his fingers had finally ceased. The eruption of power from Kurald Galain that had taken him so unawares had vanished, leaving little more than a vague unease that only slightly soured the taste of the wine. Strange disturbances these nights; who could say their portent?

The High Priestess might have an idea or two, he suspected, although the punctuation of every statement from her never changed, now, did it? Half

smiling, he sipped again at his drink.

Seerdomin frowned and sat back. 'This is an assault I cannot survive,' he pronounced. 'The Jester's deceit was well played, Spinnock. There was no anticipating that.'

'Truly?' Spinnock asked. 'With these allies here?'

Seerdomin grimaced at the other two players, then grunted a sour laugh. 'Ah, yes, I see your point. That kelyk takes their minds, I think.'

'Sharpens, just so you know,' said Garsten, licking his stained lips. 'Although I'd swear, some nights it's more potent than other times, wouldn't you say so, Fuldit?'

'Eh? Yah, s'pose so. When you gonna move den, Seerdomin? Eh? Resto, bring us another bottle!'

'Perhaps,' muttered Seerdomin, 'it's *my* mind that's not sharp. I believe I must surrender.'

Spinnock said nothing, although he was disappointed – no, he was shaken. He could see a decent counter, had been assuming his opponent had seen it immediately, but had been busy seeking something better, something wilder. Other nights, Seerdomin's talent would burst through at moments like these – a fearless gambit that seemed to pivot the world on this very tabletop.

*Perhaps if I wait a little longer—*

'I yield,' said Seerdomin.

Words uttered, a crisis pronounced.

'Resto, bring us a pitcher, if you'd be so—' Seerdomin got no further. He seemed to jolt back into his chair, as if an invisible hand had just slammed into his chest. His eyes were on the tavern door.

Spinnock twisted in his seat to see that strangers had arrived at the Scour. A young woman wearing a rough-woven russet robe, her hair cut short – shorter even than the High Priestess's – yet the same midnight black. A pale

face both soft and exquisite, eyes of deep brown, now searching through the gloom, finding at last the one she sought: Seerdomin. Behind her crowded others, all wearing little more than rags, their wan faces tight with something like panic.

The woman in the lead walked over.

Seerdomin sat like a man nailed to his chair. All colour had left his face a moment earlier, but now it was darkening, his eyes flaring with hard anger.

'Benighted—'

'This is my refuge,' he said. 'Leave. Now.'

'We—'

'"We"? Look at your followers, Priestess.'

She turned, in time to see the last of them rush out of the tavern door.

Seerdomin snorted.

Impressively, the young woman held her ground. The robe fell open – lacking a belt – and Spinnock Durav judged she was barely adolescent. A priestess? *Ah, the Great Barrow, the Redeemer.* 'Benighted,' she resumed, in a voice that few would find hard to listen to, indeed, at length, 'I am not here for myself. Those who were with me insisted, and even if their courage failed them at the end, this makes their need no less valid.'

'They came with demands,' Seerdomin said. 'They have no right, and they realized the truth of that as soon as they saw me. You should now do the same, and leave as they have.'

'I must try—'

Seerdomin surged to his feet, suddenly enough to startle Garsten and Fuldit despite their addled senses, and both stared up wide-eyed and frightened.

The priestess did not even flinch. 'I must try,' she repeated, 'for their sake, and for my own. We are beset in the camp—'

'No,' cut in Seerdomin. 'You have no right.'

'Please, will you just listen?'

The hard edge of those words clearly surprised Seerdomin. Garsten and Fuldit, collecting their tankards and bottles, quickly left the table.

Spinnock Durav rose, bowed slightly to both, and made for the exit. As he passed Resto – who stood motionless with a pitcher in his hand – he said under his breath, 'On my tab, please – this entire night. Seerdomin will have no thought of you when he leaves.'

Resto blinked up at him, then nodded.

In the darkness opposite the Scour's door, Spinnock Durav waited. He had half expected to see the pilgrims waiting outside, but the street was empty – they had fled indeed, at a run, probably all the way back to the camp. There was little spine in the followers of the Redeemer.

With at least one exception, he corrected himself as the priestess stepped outside.

Even from ten paces away, he saw her sag slightly, as if finding herself on suddenly watery legs. Tugging the robe tight round herself, she set off, three, four strides, then slowed and finally halted to turn and face Spinnock Durav.

Who came forward. 'My pardon, Priestess,' he said.

'Your friend took that pitcher for himself,' she said. 'Expect a long night. If you have a care you can collect him in a few bells – I'd rather he not spend a senseless night lying on that filthy floor.'

'I would have thought the possibility might please you,' Spinnock said.

She frowned. 'No. He is the Benighted.'

'And what does that mean?'

She hesitated, then said, 'Each day, until recently, he came to the Great Barrow and knelt before it. Not to pray, not to deliver a trinket.'

Confused, Spinnock Durav asked, 'What, then?'

'He would rather that remain a secret, I suspect.'

'Priestess, he is my friend. I see well his distress—'

'And why does that bother you so? More than a friend might feel – I can sense that. Most friends might offer sympathy, even more, but within them remains the stone thought that they are thankful that they themselves do not share their friend's plight. But that is not within you, not with this Seerdomin. No,' she drew a step closer, eyes searching, 'he answers a need, and so wounded as he now is, *you* begin to bleed.'

'Mother Dark, woman!'

She retreated at his outburst and looked away. 'I am sorry. Sir, the Benighted kneels before the Great Barrow and delivers unto the Redeemer the most precious gift of all. *Company.* Asking for nothing. He comes to relieve the Redeemer's loneliness.' She ran a hand back through her short hair. 'I sought to tell him something, but he would not hear me.'

'Can I—'

'I doubt it. I tried to tell him what I am sensing from the Redeemer. Sir, your friend is *missed.'* She sighed, turning away. 'If all who worship did so without need. If all came to their saviour unmindful of that title and its burden, if they came as friends—' she glanced back at him, 'what would happen then, do you think? I wonder . . .'

He watched her walk away, feeling humbled, too shaken to pursue, to root out the answers – the details – he needed most. To find out what he could do. For Seerdomin. For her.

*For her?*

*Now, why should she matter? By the Abyss, what has she done to me?*

*And how in the Mother's name can Seerdomin resist her?*

How many women had there been? He had lost count. It would have been better, perhaps, if he'd at least once elected to share his gift of longevity.

Better, yes, than watching those few who'd remained with him for any length of time lose all their beauty, surrendering their youth, until there was no choice but for Kallor to discard them, to lock them away, one by one, in some tower on some windswept knoll. What else could he have done? They hobbled into lives of misery, and that misery was an affront to his sensibilities. Too much bitterness, too much malice in those hot, ageing eyes ever fixing upon him. Did he not age as well? True, a year for them was but a heartbeat for Kallor, but see the lines of his face, see the slow wasting of muscle, the iron hue of his hair . . .

It was not just a matter of choosing the slowest burning wood, after all, was it? And with that thought he kicked at the coals of the fire, watched sparks roil nightward. Sometimes, the urgent flames of the quick and the shortlived delivered their own kind of heat. Hard wood and slow burn, soft wood and smouldering reluctance before ashen collapse. Resinous wood and oh how she flared! Blinding, yes, a glory no man could turn from.

Too bad he'd had to kill every child he begat. No doubt that left most of his wives and lovers somewhat disaffected. But he had not been so cruel as to hesitate, had he? No. Why, he'd tear those ghastly babes from their mothers' arms not moments after they'd tumbled free of the womb, and was that not a true sign of mercy? No one grows attached to dead things, not even mothers.

Attachments, yes, now they were indeed a waste of time and, more relevantly, a weakness. To rule an empire – to rule a hundred empires – one needed a certain objectivity. All was to be used, to be remade howsoever he pleased. Why, he had launched vast construction projects to glorify his rule, but few understood that it was not the completion that mattered, but the work itself and all that it implied – his command over their lives, their loyalty, their labour. Why, he could work them for decades, see generations of the fools pass one by one, all working each and every day of their lives, and still they did not understand what it meant for them to give to him – to Kallor – so many years of their mortal existence, so much of it, truly, that any rational soul would howl at the cruel injustice of such a life.

This was, as far as he was concerned, the real mystery of civilization – and for all that he exploited it he was, by the end, no closer to understanding it. This willingness of otherwise intelligent (well, reasonably intelligent) people to parcel up and then bargain away appalling percentages of their very limited lives, all in service to someone else. And the rewards? Ah, some security, perhaps. The cement that is stability. A sound roof, something on the plate, the beloved offspring each one destined to repeat the whole travail. And was that an even exchange?

It would not have been so, for him. He knew that, had known it from the very first. He would bargain away nothing of his life. He would serve no one, yield none of his labour to the edification and ever-expanding wealth of some fool who imagined that his or her own part of the bargain was profound in its generosity, was indeed the most precious of gifts. That to work for him or her was a *privilege* – gods! The conceit of that! The lie, so bristling and charged in its brazen display!

Just how many rules of civil behaviour were designed to perpetuate such egregious schemes of power and control of the few over the many? Rules defended to the death (usually the death of the many, rarely that of the few) with laws and wars, with threats and brutal repression – ah, those were the days, were they not? How he had gloried in that outrage!

He would never be one of the multitude. And he had proved it, again and again, and again. And he would continue to prove it.

A crown was within reach. A kingship waited to be claimed. Mastery not over something as mundane as an empire – that game had grown stale long ago – but over a realm. An entity consisting of all the possible forces of existence. The power of earthly flesh, every element unbound, the coruscating will of belief, the skein of politics, religion, social accord, sensibilities, woven from the usual tragic roots of past ages golden and free of pain and new ages bright with absurd promise. While through it all fell the rains of oblivion, the cascading torrent of failure and death, suffering and misery, a god broken and for ever doomed to remain so – oh, Kallor knew he could usurp such a creature, leave it as powerless as his most abject subject.

All – *all of it* – within his reach.

He kicked again at the embers, the too-small branches that had made up this shortlived fire, saw countless twigs fall into white ash. A few picked bones were visible amidst the coals, all that remained of the pathetic creature he had devoured earlier this night.

A smear of clouds cut a swath across the face of the stars and the dust-veiled moon had yet to rise. Somewhere out on the plain coyotes bickered with the night. He had found trader tracks this past day, angling northwest-southeast. Well-worn wagon ruts, the tramping of yoked oxen. Garbage strewn to either side. Rather disappointing, all things considered; he had grown used to solitude, where the only sign of human activity had been the occasional grassfire on the western horizon – plains nomads and their mysterious ways – something to do with the bhederin herds and the needs for various grasses, he suspected. If they spied him they wisely kept their distance. His passing through places had a way of agitating ancient spirits, a detail he had once found irritating enough to hunt the things down and kill them, but no longer. Let them whine and twitch, thrash and moan in the grip of timorous nightmares, and all that. Let their mortal children cower in the high grasses until he was well and gone.

The High King had other concerns. And other matters with which he could occupy his mind.

He sat straighter, every sense stung awake by a burgeoning of power to the north. Slowly rising to his feet, Kallor stared into the darkness. Yes, something foaming awake, what might it be? And . . . yes, *another* force, and that one he well recognized – Tiste Andii.

Breath hissed between worn teeth. Of course, if he continued on this path he would have come full circle, back to that horrid place – what was its name? Yes, Coral. The whole mess with the Pannion Domin, oh, the stupidity! The pathetic, squalid idiocy of that day!

Could this be those two accursed hunters? Had they somehow swept round him? Were they now striking south to finally face him? Well, he might welcome that. He'd killed his share of dragons, both pure and

Soletaken. *One at a time, of course. Two at once . . . that could be a challenge.*

For all this time, their pursuit had been a clumsy, witless thing. So easily fooled, led astray – he could have ambushed them countless times, and perhaps he should have done just that. At the very least, he might have come to understand the source of their persistent – yes, pathological – relentlessness. Had he truly angered Rake that much? It seemed ridiculous. The Son of Darkness was not one to become so obsessed; indeed, none of the Tiste Andii were, and was that not their fundamental weakness? This failing of will?

How had he so angered Korlat and Orfantal? Was it because he did not stay, did not elect to fight alongside all the doomed fools on that day? *Let the Malazans bleed! They were our enemies! Let the T'lan Imass betray Silverfox – she deserved it!*

*It was not our war, Brood. Not our war, Rake. Why didn't you listen to me?*

*Bah, come and face me, then, Korlat. Orfantal. Come, let us be done with this rubbish!*

The twin flaring of powers ebbed suddenly.

Somewhere far to the east the coyotes resumed their frantic cries.

He looked skyward, saw the gleam of the rising moon, its ravaged scowl of reflected sunlight and the blighted dust of its stirred slumber. *Look at you. Your face is my face, let us be truthful about that. Beaten and boxed about, yet we climb upright time and again, to resume our trek.*

*The sky cares nothing for you, dear one. The stars don't even see you.*

*But you will march on, because it is what you do.*

A final kick at the coals. Let the grasses burn to scar his wake, he cared not. No, he would not come full circle – he never did, which was what had kept him alive for this long. No point in changing anything, was there?

Kallor set out. Northward. There were, if he recalled, settlements, and roads, and a main trader track skirling west and north, out across the Cinnamon Wastes, all the way to Darujhistan.

Where he had an appointment to keep. A destiny to claim by right of sword and indomitable will.

The moon's light took hold of his shadow and made a mess of it. Kallor walked on, oblivious of such details.

*

Three scrawny horses, one neglected ox and a wagon with a bent axle and a cracked brake: the amassed inherited wealth of the village of Morsko comprised only these. Bodies left to rot on the tavern floor – they should have set fire to the place, Nimander realized. Too late now, too hard the shove away from that horrid scene. And what of the victims on their crosses, wrapped and leaking black ichors into the muddy earth? They had left them as well.

Motionless beneath a blanket in the bed of the wagon, Clip stared sightlessly at the sideboards. Flecks of the porridge they had forced down his throat that morning studded his chin. Flies crawled and buzzed round his mouth. Every now and then, faint trembling rippled through his body.

*Stolen away.*

Noon, the third day now on this well-made cobbled, guttered road. They had just passed south of the town of Heath, which had once been a larger settlement, perhaps a city, and might well return to such past glory, this time on the riches of kelyk, a dilute form of saemankelyk, the Blood of the Dying God. These details and more they had learned from the merchant trains rolling up and down this road, scores of wagons setting out virtually empty to villages and towns east of Bastion – to Outlook itself – then returning loaded with amphorae of the foul drink, wagons groaning beneath the weight, back to some form of central distribution hub in Bastion.

The road itself ran south of these settlements – all of which nested above the shoreline of Pilgrim Lake. When it came opposite a village there would

be a junction, with a track or wend leading north. A more substantial crossroads marked the intersection of levelled roads to the reviving cities of Heath, Kel Tor and, somewhere still ahead, Sarn.

Nimander and his group did not travel disguised, did not pretend to be other than what they were, and it was clear that the priests, fleeing ahead of them, had delivered word to all their kin on the road and, from there, presumably into the towns and villages. At the junctions, in the ramshackle waystations and storage sheds, food and water and forage for the animals awaited them.

The Dying God – or his priests – had blessed them, apparently, and now awaited their pleasure in Bastion. The one who had sacrificed his soul to the Dying God was doubly blessed, and some final consummation was anticipated, probably leading to Clip's soul's being thoroughly devoured by an entity who was cursed to suffer for eternity. Thus accursed, it was little wonder the creature welcomed company.

All things considered, it was well that their journey had been one of ease and accommodation. Nimander suspected that his troupe would have been rather more pleased to carve their way through hordes of frenzied fanatics, assuming they could manage such a thing.

Having confirmed that Clip's comatose condition was unchanged, he climbed down from the wagon and returned to the scruffy mare he had been riding since Morsko. The poor beast's ribs had been like the bars of a cage under tattered vellum, its eyes listless and its tan coat patchy and dull. In the three days since, despite the steady riding, the animal had recovered somewhat under Nimander's ministrations. He was not particularly enamoured of horses in general, but no creature deserved to suffer.

As he climbed into the worn saddle he saw Skintick standing, stepping up on to the wagon's bench where Nenanda sat holding the reins, and shading his eyes to look southward across the empty plain.

'See something?'

A moment, then, 'Yes. Someone . . . walking.'

Up from the south? 'But there's nothing out there.'

Kedeviss and Aranatha rose in their stirrups.

'Let's get going,' Desra said from the wagon bed. 'It's too hot to be just sitting here.'

Nimander could see the figure now, tall for a human. Unkempt straggly grey hair fanned out round his head like an aura. He seemed to be wearing a long coat of chain, down to halfway between his knees and ankles, slitted in front. The hand-and-a-half grip of a greatsword rose above his left shoulder.

'An old bastard,' muttered Skintick, 'to be walking like that.'

'Could be he lost his horse,' said Nenanda disinterestedly. 'Desra is right – we should be going.'

Striding like one fevered under the sun, the stranger came ever closer. Something about him compelled Nimander's attention, a kind of dark fascination – for what, he couldn't quite name. A cascade of images tumbled through his mind. As if he was watching an apparition bludgeoning its way out from some hoary legend, from a time when gods struggled, hands about each other's throats, when blood fell as rain and the sky itself rolled and crashed against the shores of the Abyss. All this, riding across the dusty air between them as the old man came up to the road. All this, written in the deep lines of his gaunt visage, in the bleak wastelands of his grey eyes.

*'He is as winter,*' murmured Skintick.

Yes, and something . . . colder.

'What city lies beyond?' the man asked.

A startled moment when Nimander realized that the stranger had spoken Tiste Andii. 'Heath.'

The man turned, faced west. 'This way, then, lies Bastion and the Cinnamon Track.'

Nimander shrugged.

'You are from Coral?' the stranger asked, scanning the group. 'Is he still camped there, then? But no, I recognize none of you, and that would not be possible. Even so, tell me why I should not kill you all.'

That got Nenanda's attention, and he twisted in his seat to sneer down at the old man.

But Nimander's blood had turned to ice. 'Because, sir, you do not know us.'

Pale eyes settled on him. 'You have a point, actually. Very well, instead, I would travel with you. Ride, yes, in your wagon – I have worn my boots through crossing this wretched plain. Tell me, have you water, decent food?'

Nenanda twisted further to glare at Nimander. 'Turn this fool away. He can drink our dust.'

The old man regarded Nenanda for a moment, then turned back to Nimander. 'Tie a leash on this one and we should be fine.' And he stepped up to the wagon and, setting a foot on a spoke of the rear wheel, pulled himself up. Where he paused, frowning as he studied the prostrate form of Clip. 'Is he ill?' he asked Desra. 'Are you caught with plague? No, not that – your kind rarely succumb to such things. Stop staring, child, and tell me what is wrong with this one.'

'None of your business,' she snapped, as Nimander had known she would. 'If you're going to crowd in then sit there, to give him some shade.'

Thin brows lifted, then a faint smile flickered across his withered, cracked lips. And without another word he moved to where Desra had indicated and settled down, stretching out his legs. 'Some water, darling, if you please.'

She stared at him for a moment, then pulled loose a skin and slid it over. 'That one's not water,' she said with a sweet smile. 'It's called kelyk. A local brew. Very popular.'

Nimander sat motionless, watching all this. He saw that Skintick and Nenanda were both doing the same.

At Desra's words, the old man grimaced. 'I'd rather water,' he said, but reached for the skin anyway. Tugged free the stopper, then sniffed.

And recoiled. 'Imperial dust!' he said in a growl. He replaced the stopper and flung the skin to the back of the wagon. 'If you won't spare water then never mind, bitch. We can settle your inhospitality later.'

'Desra,' said Nimander as he gathered his reins, 'give the man some water.'

'After he called me a bitch?'

'After you tried poisoning him with kelyk, yes.'

They set out on the road, westward. Two more days, said the last trader they had passed that morning. Past Sarn and the lesser lake. To Bastion, the city by the inland sea, a sea so filled with salt no sailor or fisher could drown in it, and where no fish could be found barring an enormous eel with the jaws of a wolf. Salt that had not been there a generation ago, but the world will change, amen.

The Abject Temple of Saemenkelyk awaited them in Bastion.

Two days, then, to meet the Dying God. And, one way or another, to wrest from it Clip's soul. Nimander did not think the priests would just step aside for that.

Riding his mount alongside the wagon, Nimander spoke to the old man. 'If you are going to Bastion, sir, you might want to reconsider staying with us.'

'And why is that.' There was little in that tone even remotely interrogative.

'I don't think I can adequately explain why,' Nimander replied. 'You'll just have to take me at my word.'

Instead the old man unslung his weapon and set it between him and Clip, then he laced his long-fingered hands behind his head and settled back, closing his eyes. 'Wake me when it's time to eat,' he said.

The worn grip and nicked pommel of the greatsword, the broad cross-hilt and the scarred wooden scabbard all drew Nimander's attention. *He can still*

*use that damned weapon, ancient as he is.*

Grim legends, the clangour of warring gods, yes, this gaunt warrior belonged to such things.

He collected his reins. 'As you like, stranger.' Nudging the mare into a trot, he glanced up to meet Skintick's gaze as he rode past. And saw none of the usual mocking pleasure. Instead, something wan, distraught.

True, there was not much to laugh about, was there?

*My unhappy kin.*

Onward, then, to Bastion.

*

A succession of ridges stepped down towards the basin of the valley, each marking a time when the river had been wider, its cold waters churning away from dying glaciers and meltwater lakes. Now, a narrow twisting gully threaded along the distant floor, fringed by cottonwoods. Standing upon the highest ridge, Traveller looked down to the next level, where a half-dozen tipis rose, not quite breaking the high ground skyline. Figures moving about, clothed in tanned hides and skins, a few dogs, the latter now padding out to the camp's edge closest to the slope, sharp ears and lifted noses alerted to his presence although not one barked.

A herd of horses foraged further down, a small, stocky steppe breed that Traveller had never seen before. Ochre flanks deepening to brown on the haunches, manes and tails almost black.

Down on the valley floor, some distance to the right, carrion birds were on the ground, perched on islands of dead flesh beneath the branches of cottonwoods. Other horses wandered there, these ones more familiar, trailing reins as they cropped the high grasses.

Two men walked out to the base of the slope. Traveller set out down towards them. His own escort of Hounds had left him this morning, either off on a hunt or gone for good – there was no telling which.

Sun-burnished faces watched him approach. Eyes nestled in wind-stretched epicanthic folds. Midnight-black hair in loosely bound manes, through which were threaded – rather sweetly – white blossoms. Long, narrow-bladed curved knives in beaded belts, the iron black except along the honed edges. Their clothing was beautifully sewn with red-dyed gut thread, studded here and there with bronze rivets.

The elder one, on the right, now held up both hands, palms outward, and said in archaic Daru, 'Master of the Wolf-Horses, welcome. Do not kill us. Do not rape our women. Do not steal our children. Leave us with no diseases. Leave us our g'athend horses-of-the-rock, our mute dogs, our food and our shelters, our weapons and our tools. Eat what we give you. Drink what we give you. Smoke what we give you. Thank us for all three. Grant your seed if a woman comes to you in the night, kill all vermin you find. Kiss with passion, caress with tenderness, gift us with the wisdom of your years but none of their bitterness. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not hate, do not fear, and neither will we hate or fear you. Do not invite your wolf-horses into our camp, lest they devour us and all our beasts. Welcome, then, wanderer, and we will tell you of matters, and show you other matters. We are the Kindaru, keepers of the horses-of-the-rock, the last clan left in all Lama Teth Andath – the grasses we have made so that trees do not reach high to steal the sky. Welcome. You need a bath.'

To such a greeting, Traveller could only stand, silent, bemused, torn between laughter and weeping.

The younger of the two men – perhaps in his mid-twenties – smiled wryly and said, 'The more strangers we meet, the more we add to our words of welcome. This is born of experience, most of it sad, unpleasant. If you mean us harm, we ask that you heed the words given you, and so turn away. Of course, if you mean to betray us, then there is nothing we can do. Deceit is not our way.'

Traveller grimaced. 'Deceit is everyone's way.'

Twin expressions of dismay, so similar that it was made clear they were father and son. 'Yes,' said the son, 'that is true. If we saw that you would enter our camp and be with us, yet plan betrayal, why, we would plan the

same, and seek to deliver unto you first what you thought to deliver unto us.'

'You are truly the last camp left?'

'Yes, we are waiting to die. Our ways, our memories. And the g'athend will run free once more, until they too are gone – for the horses we keep are the last of their kind, too.'

'Do you ride them?'

'No, we worship them.'

Yet they spoke Daru – what strange history twisted and isolated these ones from all the others? What turned them away from farms and villages, from cities and riches? 'Kindaru, I humbly accept your welcome and will strive to be a worthy guest.'

Both men now smiled. And the younger one gestured with one hand.

A faint sound behind him made Traveller turn, to see four nomads rising as if from nowhere on the slope, armed with spears.

Traveller looked back at the father and son. 'You are all too familiar with strangers, I think.'

They walked down into the camp. The silent dogs, ranging ahead, were met by a small group of children all bedecked in white flowers. Bright smiles flashed up at Traveller, tiny hands taking his to lead him onward to the hearthfires, where women were now preparing a midday meal. Iron pots filled with some milky substance steamed, the smell pungent, sweet and vaguely alcoholic.

A low bench was set out, four-legged and padded, the woven coverlet a rainbow of coloured threads in zigzag patterns. The wooden legs were carved into horse heads, noses almost touching in the middle, the manes flowing in sweeping curves, all stained a lustrous ochre and deep brown. The artistry was superb, the heads so detailed Traveller could see the veins along the cheeks, the lines of the eyelids and the dusty eyes both opaque and depthless.

There was only one such bench, and it was, he knew, to be his for the duration of his stay.

The father and son, and three others of the band, two women and a very old man, all sat cross-legged in a half-circle, facing him across the fire. The children finally released his hands and a woman gave him a gourd filled with the scalded milk, in which floated strips of meat.

'Skathandi,' said the father. 'Camped down by the water. Here to ambush us and steal our horses, for the meat of the g'athend is highly prized by people in the cities. There were thirty in all, raiders and murderers – we will eat their horses, but you may have one to ride if you desire so.'

Traveller sipped the milk, and as the steam filled his face his eyes widened. Fire in his throat, then blissful numbness. Blinking tears from his eyes, he tried to focus on the man who had spoken. 'You sprang the ambush, then. Thirty? You must be formidable warriors.'

'This was the second such camp we found. All slain. Not by us, friend. Someone, it seems, likes the Skathandi even less than we do.'

The father hesitated, and in the pause his son said, 'It was our thought that you were following that someone.'

'Ah.' Traveller frowned. 'Someone? There is but one – one who attacks Skathandi camps and slaughters everyone?'

Nods answered him.

'A demon, we think, who walks like a storm, dark with terrible rage. One who covers well his tracks.' The son made an odd gesture with one hand, a rippling of the fingers. 'Like a ghost.'

'How long ago did this demon travel past here?'

'Three days.'

'Are these Skathandi a rival tribe?'

'No. Raiders, preying on caravans and all who dwell on the Plain. Sworn, it is said, to a most evil man, known only as the Captain. If you see an

eight-wheeled carriage, so high there is one floor above and a balcony with a golden rail – drawn, it is said, by a thousand slaves – then you will have found the palace of this Captain. He sends out his raiders, and grows fat on the trade of his spoils.'

'I am not following this demon,' said Traveller. 'I know nothing of it.'

'That is probably well.'

'It heads north?'

'Yes.'

Traveller thought about that as he took another sip of the appallingly foul drink. With a horse under him he would begin to make good time, but that might well take him right on to that demon, and he did not relish a fight with a creature that could slay thirty bandits and leave nary a footprint.

One child, who had been kneeling beside him, piling handfuls of dirt on to Traveller's boot-top, now clambered up on to his thigh, reached into the gourd and plucked out a sliver of meat, and waved it in front of Traveller's mouth.

'Eat,' said the son. 'The meat is from a turtle that tunnels, very tender. The miska milk softens it and removes the poison. One generally does not drink the miska, as it can send the mind travelling so far that it never returns. Too much and it will eat holes in your stomach and you will die in great pain.'

'Ah. You could have mentioned that earlier.' Traveller took the meat from the child. He was about to plop it into his mouth when he paused. 'Anything else I should know before I begin chewing?'

'No. You will dream tonight of tunnelling through earth. Harmless enough. All food has memory, so the miska proves – we cook everything in it, else we taste the bitterness of death.'

Traveller sighed. 'This miska, it is mare's milk?'

Laughter erupted.

'No, no!' cried the father. 'A plant. A root bulb. Mare milk belongs to foals and colts, of course. Humans have their own milk, after all, and it is not drunk by adults, only babes. Yours, stranger, is a strange world!' And he laughed some more.

Traveller ate the sliver of meat.

Most tender – indeed, delicious. That night, sleeping beneath furs in a tipi, he dreamt of tunnelling through hard-packed, stony earth, pleased by its surrounding warmth, the safety of darkness.

He was woken shortly before dawn by a young woman, soft of limb and damp with desire, who wrapped herself tight about him. He was startled when she prised open his mouth with her own and deposited a full mouthful of spit, strongly spiced with something, and would not pull away until he swallowed it down. By the time she and the drug she had given him were done, there was not a seed left in his body.

In the morning, Traveller and the father went down to the abandoned Skathandi horses. With help from the mute dogs they were able to capture one of the animals, a solid piebald gelding of sixteen or so hands with mischief in its eyes.

The dead raiders, he noted as his companion went in search among the camp's wreckage for a worthy saddle, had indeed been cut to pieces. Although the work of the scavengers had reduced most of the corpses to tufts of hair, torn sinew and broken bones, there was enough evidence of severed limbs and decapitations to suggest some massive edged weapon at work. Where bones had been sliced through, the cut was sharp with no sign of crushing.

The father brought over the best of the tack, and Traveller saw with surprise that it was a Seven Cities saddle, with Malazan military brands on the leather girth-straps.

He was just finishing cinching the straps tight – after the gelding could hold its breath no longer – when he heard shouting from the Kindaru camp, and both he and the father turned.

A rider had appeared on the same ridge that Traveller had come to yesterday, pausing for but a moment before guiding the mount down into the camp.

Traveller swung himself on to his horse and gathered the reins.

'See the beast she rides!' gasped the man beside him. 'It is a Jhag'athend! We are blessed! Blessed!' And all at once he was running back to the camp.

Traveller set heels to his gelding and rode after the man.

The rider was indeed a woman, and Traveller saw almost immediately that she was of Seven Cities stock. She looked harried, threadbare and worn, but a ferocious fire blazed in her eyes when they fell upon Traveller as he rode into the camp.

'Is there anywhere in the world where I won't run into damned Malazans?' she demanded.

Traveller shrugged. 'And I hardly expected to encounter an Ugari woman on the back of a Jhag stallion here on the Lamatath Plain.'

Her scowl deepened. 'I am told there's a demon travelling through here, heading north. Killing everyone in his path and no doubt enjoying every moment of it.'

'So it seems.'

'Good,' snapped the woman.

'Why?' Traveller asked.

She scowled. 'So I can give him his damned horse back, that's why!'

# BOOK TWO

# COLD-EYED VIRTUES

From her ribs and from the hair of women
Seen swimming sun-warmed rivers in summer's light,
From untroubled brows and eyes clear and driven
Gazing out from tower windows when falls the night

From hands cupped round pipe bowls alabaster carved
When veiled invitations coy as blossoms under shade
Invite a virgin's dance a rose-dappled love so starved
Where seen a coarse matron not yet ready to fade

And the tall bones of legs 'neath rounded vessels perched
Swaying lusty as a tropical storm above white coral sands
Where in all these gathered recollections I have searched
To fashion this love anew from soil worked well
by my hands

And into the bower garland-woven petals fluttering down
Hovers the newfound woman's familiar unknown face
For on this earth no solitude is welcomed when found
And she who is gone must be in turn replaced

And by the look in her eye I am a composite man
Assembled alike from stone, twig and stirred sediments
Lovers lost and all those who might have been
We neither should rail nor stoke searing resentments
For all the rivers this world over do flow in but one
Direction

*Love of the Broken*
Breneth

# CHAPTER SEVEN

'I can see your reasons, my love. But won't you get thirsty?'

Inscription found beneath
capstone of household well,
Lakefront District, Darujhistan

As fast as his small feet could carry him, the small boy rushed through Two-Ox Gate and out on to the raised cobble road that, if he elected to simply hurry on, and on, would take him to the very edge of the world, where he could stand on the shore staring out upon a trackless ocean, so vast it swallowed the sun every night. Alas, he wasn't going that far. Out to the hills just past the shanty town to collect dung, a bag full, as much as he could carry balanced on his head.

It is said by wise and sentimental poets that a child's eyes see farther than an adult's, and who would – with even less than a moment's thought – claim otherwise? Beyond the ridge awaits a vista crowded with possibilities, each one deemed more improbable than the last by teeth-grinding codgers eager to assert a litany of personal failures should anyone care to hear, but no one does and if that isn't proof the world's gone to ruin then what is? But *improbabilities* is a word few children know, and even if they did, why, they would dismiss the notion with a single hand fluttering overhead as they danced to the horizon. Because it will not do to creep timorously into the future, no, one should leap, sail singing through the air, and who can say where one's feet will finally set down on this solid, unknown land?

The boy hurried on, tracked by the dull eyes of the lepers in front of their hovels, squatting forlorn and forgotten each in a nest of flies when flies with singular poignancy expound the proof of cold-legged indifference. And the scrawny half-wild dogs crept out to follow him for a time, gauging with animal hunger if this one might be weakened, a thing to be taken down. But the boy collected rocks and when a dog drew too close he let fly. Ducked tails and startled yelps and now the dogs vanished like ghosts beneath stilted shacks and down narrow, twisting lanes off the main road.

Overhead, the sun regarded all with its unblinking omnipotence, and went on stealing moisture from every surface to feed its unquenchable thirst. And there were long-legged birds prancing on the sewage flats just past Brownrun Bay, beaks darting down to snatch up fleas and whatnot, while lizard-ducks nested on floating shit islands further out, calling to one another their hissing announcement of each bell in perfect cadence with the city's water clocks and those sonorous chimes drifting out over the lake,

although why lizard-ducks were obsessed with such artificial segmentation of time was a question as yet unanswered even after centuries of scholarly pursuit – not that the foul-smelling creatures gave a whit for the careers they had spawned, more concerned as they were with enticing up from the soupy water eels that would swallow their eggs, only to find the shells impervious to all forms of digestion, whilst the scaled monstrosities within prepared to peck their way free and then feed on eel insides unto gluttony.

What significance, then, such details of the natural world, when the boy simply walked on, his long hair bleached by the sun and stirred like a mane by the freshening breeze? Why, none other than the value of indifference, beneath which a child may pass unnoticed, may pass by free as a fluffed seed on the warm currents of summer air. With only a faint memory of his dream the night before (and yes, the one before that, too, and so on) of that face so vicious and the eyes so caustic as to burn him with their dark intentions, the face that might pursue him through each day with the very opposite of indifference, and see how deadly that forgetfulness might be for the child who hurried on, now on a dirt track winding its way up into the modest hills where baleful goats gathered beneath the occasional tree.

For the blessing of indifference might be spun on end, momentarily offering the grim option of curse, because one child's gift can well be another's hurt. Spare then a moment for the frightened beast named Snell, and all the cruel urges driving him to lash out, to torment the brother he never wanted. He too thrives on indifference, this squat, round-shouldered, swaggering tyrant before whom the wild dogs in the shanty town cowered in instinctive recognition that he was one of their own, and the meanest of the lot besides; while the boy, chest swelled with power, continued on, trailing his intended victim with something in his soul that went far beyond a simple beating this time, oh, yes. The thing inside, it spread black, hairy legs like a spider, his hands transformed there at the end of his wrists, oh, spiders, yes, hook-taloned and fanged and onyx-eyed, and they could close into bony fists if they so desired, or they could stab with venom – why not both?

He carried rocks as well. To wing at the lepers he passed, then laugh as they flinched or cried out in pain, and he rode their ineffectual curses all the

way up the road.

While, all along the hillside, the sun had done its work, and the boy filled his bag with tinder-dry dung for this night's hearthfire. Bent over like an old man, he roved this way and that. This bounty would please the woman-who-was-not-his-mother, who mothered him as a mother should – although, it must be said, lacking something essential, some maternal instinct to awaken cogent realization that her adopted son lived in grave danger – and as the sack bulked in his grip, he thought to pause and rest for a time, there, up on the summit of the hill. So that he could look out over the lake, watch the beautiful sails of the feluccas and fisher boats.

Set free his mind to wander – oh, memories are made of moments such as this one.

And, alas, of the one soon to come.

But give him these moments of freedom, so precious for their rarity. Begrudge not this gift of indifference.

It could, after all, very well be his last day of such freedom.

Down on the track at the base of the hill, Snell has spied his quarry. The spiders at the ends of his wrists opened and closed their terrible black legs. And like a monster that wrings goats' necks for the pleasure of it, he clambers upward, eyes fixed on that small back and tousled head there at the edge of the ridge.

In a temple slowly drowning there sat a Trell entirely covered in drying, blackening blood, and in his soul there was enough compassion to encompass an entire world, yet he sat with eyes of stone. When it is all one can do to simply hold on, then to suffer is to weather a deluge no god can ease.

Beneath the blood, faint traceries of spider's web tattooing etched his dark brown hide. These stung like hot wires wrapped about his body, his limbs; wrapped everywhere and seeming to tighten incrementally with every shiver that took him.

Three times now he had been painted in the blood of Burn, the Sleeping Goddess. The web was proving a skein of resistance, a net trapping him on the inside, and keeping out the blessed gift of the goddess.

He would pass through Burn's Gate, into the molten fires of the underworld, and the priests had prepared for that, yet now it seemed they would fail in fashioning a means of protecting his mortal flesh. What then could he do?

Well, he could walk away from this place and its huddled, doleful priests. Find another way to cross a continent, and then an ocean. He could perhaps try another temple, try to bargain with another god or goddess. He could—

'We have failed you, Mappo Runt.'

He glanced over to meet the anguished eyes of the High Priest.

'I am sorry,' the old man went on. 'The web that once healed you is proving most . . . selfish. Claiming you for its own – Ardatha never yields her prizes. She has snared you, for purposes unknown to any but her. She is most hateful, I think.'

'Then I will wash this off,' Mappo said, climbing to his feet, feeling the blood crack, pluck hairs from his skin. The web sang agony through him. 'The one who healed me in Ardatha's name is here in the city – I think I had better seek her out. Perhaps I can glean from her the spider goddess's intent – what it is she would have me do.'

'I would not recommend that,' the High Priest said. 'In fact, Mappo, I would run away. Soon as you can. For now, at least, Ardatha's web does not seek to hold you back from the path you have chosen. Why risk a confrontation with her? No, you must find another way, and quickly.'

Mappo considered this advice for a time, then grunted and said, 'I see the wisdom in your words; thank you. Have you any suggestions?'

The expression drooped. 'Unfortunately, I have.' He gestured and three young acolytes crept forward. 'These ones will assist in scrubbing the blood from you. In the meantime, I will send a runner and, perchance, an arrangement can be fashioned. Tell me, Mappo Runt, are you rich?'

*

Sweetest Sufferance, who had been so named by a mother either resigned to the rigours of motherhood or, conversely, poisoned by irony, blinked rapidly as she was wont to do when returning to reality. She looked round bemusedly, saw her fellow survivors seated with her, the table in their midst a chaotic clutter of cups, tankards, plates, utensils and the remnants of at least three meals. Her soft brown eyes flicked from one item to the next, then slowly lifted, out past the blank-eyed faces of her companions, and took in the taproom of Quip's Bar.

Quip Younger was barely visible on the counter, sprawled across it with his upper body and head resting on one forearm.

He slept with his mouth hanging open and slick with drool. Almost within reach of the man there squatted a rat on the counter, one front paw lifting every now and then as it seemed to study the face opposite and especially the gaping dark hole of Quip Younger's mouth.

A drunk was lying just inside the door, passed out or dead, the only other patron present this early in the morning (excepting the rat).

When she finally brought her attention back to her companions, she saw Faint studying her, one brow lifting.

Sweetest Sufferance rubbed at her round face, her cheeks reminding her, oddly enough, of the dough her mother used to knead just before the harvest festival, those big round cakes all glittering with painted honey that used to trap ants and it was her task to pick them off but that was all right because they tasted wonderful.

'Hungry again, aren't ya?'

'You can always tell,' Sweetest Sufferance replied.

'When you rub your cheeks, there's a look comes into your eyes, Sweetie.'

Faint watched as Master Quell hissed awake with a sound no different from the noise an alligator might make when one stepped too close. And glared round a moment before relaxing into a relieved slump. 'I was dreaming—'

'Yah,' cut in Faint, 'you're always dreaming, and when you ain't dreaming, you're doing, and now if only those two things were any different from each other, why, you'd actually get some rest, Master. Which we'd like to see, wouldn't we just.'

'Got you through, didn't I?'

'Losing five shareholders in the process.'

'That's the risks y'take,' Quell said, grimacing. 'Hey, who's paying for all this?'

'You might've asked that once before. You are, of course.'

'How long we been here? Gods, my bladder feels like I'm about to pass a papaya.' And with that he reeled – wincing – upright, and tottered for the closet behind the bar.

The rat watched him pass with suspicious eyes, then crept a few waddles closer to Quip Younger's mouth.

Glanno Tarp jerked alive in his chair. 'No more bargains!' he snarled. 'Oh,' he then said, slouching back down. 'Somebody stopped bringing beer – can they do that? Sweetest, darling, I dreamt we was making love—'

'Me too,' she said. 'Only it wasn't a dream.'

Glanno's eyes widened. 'Really?'

'No, it was a nightmare. If you want another round, you'll have t'wake up Quip Younger.'

Glanno squinted over. 'He'll wake up when he can't breathe, soon as the rat goes for it. A silver council says he swallows instead of spitting out.'

At the voicing of a wager Reccanto Ilk's watery grey eyes sharpened and he said, 'I'll take that one. Only what if he does both? Swallows then chokes and spits out? When you say "swallows" you got to mean he chews if he has to.'

'Now that's quibblering again and when you never done that, Ilk? It's pointless you saying you want to wager when you keep rectivifying things.'

'The point is you're always too vague, Glanno, with these bets of yours. Y'need precision—'

'What I need is . . . well, I don't know what I need, but whatever it is you ain't got it.'

'I got it but I ain't giving it,' said Sweetest Sufferance. 'Not to none of you, anyhow. There's a man out there, oh, yes, and I'll find him one day and I'll put him in shackles and lock him in my room and I'll reduce him to a pathetic wreck. Then we'll get married.'

'The marriage prediceeds the wrecking,' Glanno said. 'So I might dream of you, darling, but that's as far as it'll ever go. That's called self-prevarication.'

'Are you sure?' Faint asked him, then, as the front door squealed open, she turned in her chair. An adolescent boy in a voluminous brown robe edged in warily, eyes like freshly laid turtle eggs. Lifting the robe he stepped gingerly over the drunk and padded across to their table and if he had a tail, why, Faint told herself, it'd be half wagging half slipping down between his legs.

'Mmm. Mmmm.'

'Would that be "Master"?' Faint asked.

The youth nodded, drew a deep breath, and tried again. 'Negotiation, for a delivery, yes?'

'Master Quell is peremptorily predispossessed,' Glanno Tarp said.

'Predisposed, he means,' Faint explained. 'What needs delivering, and where?'

'Not what. Who. Don't know where.'

'Tell you what,' Faint said, 'go get the who and bring him or her here and we'll take it from there, all right? There now, watch your step on your way out.'

Bobbing head, hurried departure.

'Since when you did the negotiating?' Reccanto asked her, squinting.

'You know,' Faint observed, 'any half-decent Denul healer could fix your bad eyes, Ilk.'

'What's it to you?'

'What it is to me is you nearly lopped my head off, you damned blind idiot – do I look like a snarling corpse?'

'Sometimes. Anyway, I figured it out at the last moment—'

'After I ducked and kicked you between the legs.'

'Right, corpses ain't that smart, so now that's settled. I was asking you a question.'

'He was,' chimed in Glanno Tarp. 'Look at us, we're short maybe six, seven – we can't be going nowhere any time soon.'

'Maybe not, but maybe it'll be a quick, easy one.'

The others all stared at her.

Faint relented. 'Fine. Besides, I was just standing in for Quell, who might never leave that closet.'

'Could be he's dead,' Sweetest Sufferance suggested.

'Internally explodicated,' said Glanno Tarp, 'and don't think I'm going in for a look.'

'There goes the rat!' hissed Reccanto Ilk.

They looked, watched, breathless.

A pause, nose twitching, then a scurry of small steps. Close now, close enough to flinch back at the reeking breath.

'Two councils it falls over dead.'

'Be more precise – it's gonna fall over dead some day, ain't it?'

'Gods below!'

The rat held its ground, edged a mite closer. Then gathered itself, stretched out its neck, and began drinking from the pool of slime with tiny, flickering laps of its slivery tongue.

'That's what I was thinking it was gonna do,' said Sweetest Sufferance.

'Liar.'

'So now he ain't never going to wake up,' said Reccanto, 'and I'm going to die here of thirst.'

The closet door creaked open and out staggered Master Quell, not looking at all refreshed. He hobbled over. 'That papaya's stuck – I need a healer—'

'Or a fruit seller,' Faint said. 'Listen, could be we got us a new contract.'

Quell's eyes bugged slightly, then he spun round and staggered back into the closet.

'Now see what you did!' snapped Reccanto.

'It's not *my* papaya, is it?'

So early in the morning, the streets of Darujhistan, barring those of markets, were ghostly, strewn with rubbish and yet somehow magical. The sun's golden light stroked every surface with a gentle artist's hand. The faint mists that had drifted in from the lake during the night now retreated once more, leaving the air crisp. In the poorer quarters, shutters opened on upper storeys and moments later the contents of chamber pots sailed out, splashing the alleys and any hapless denizen still lying drunk to the world, and moments later rats and such crept out to sample the fresh offerings.

The dolorous High Priest led Mappo Runt away from the temple quarter and down into the Lakefront District, skirting Second Tier Wall before cutting across towards the Gadrobi District – in essence taking the Trell back the way he had come the night before. As they walked, the city awoke around them, rubbed sleep from its eyes, then gawked at the shambling priest and his enormous, barbaric companion.

They eventually arrived upon a narrow, sloped street in which sat a massive, ornate carriage of a sort that Mappo had seen before, though he

could not for the moment recall where. Six horses stood in their traces, looking bored. Someone had dumped feed all round them, and there was enough fresh dung scattered about to suggest that the animals had been left there a while.

The priest directed Mappo towards a nearby tavern. 'In there,' he said. 'The Trygalle Trade Guild has made a specialty of journeys such as the one you require. Of course, they are expensive, but that is hardly surprising, is it?'

'And one simply seeks out one such caravan, wherever one might find them? That sounds to be an ineffective business plan.'

'No, they have offices. Somewhere – not a detail I possess, I'm afraid. I only knew of this carriage because its arrival destroyed the front of my cousin's shop.' And, pointing to a nearby ruin, he smiled like a man who had forgotten what real smiling signified. Then he shrugged. 'All these twists of fate. Blessed by serendipity and all that. If you fail here, Mappo Runt, you will have a long, tedious walk ahead of you. So do not fail.' He then bowed, turned and walked away.

Mappo eyed the front of the tavern. And recalled when he had last seen that sort of carriage.

*Tremorlor.*

Shareholder Faint had just stood, stretching out all the alarming kinks in her back, when the tavern door opened and a monstrous figure pushed its way in, shoulders squeezing through the frame, head ducking. A misshapen sack slung over one shoulder, a wicked knife tucked in its belt. A damned Trell.

'Glanno,' she said, 'better get Master Quell.'

Scowling, the last driver left alive in their troupe rose and limped away.

She watched as the huge barbarian stepped over the drunk and made his way to the bar. The rat looked up and hastily retreated down the length of the counter. The Trell nudged Quip Younger's head. The barkeep coughed and slowly straightened, wiping at his mouth, blinking myopically as he lifted his gaze to take in the figure looming over him.

With a bleat he reeled back a step.

'Never mind him,' Faint called out. 'You want us, over here.'

'What I want,' the Trell replied in passable Daru, 'is breakfast.'

Head bobbing, Quip bolted for the kitchen, where he was met by a screeching woman, the piercing tirade dimming as soon as the door closed behind him.

Faint dragged a bench from the nearby wall – no chair in this dump would survive – and waved to it with a glance over to the barbarian. 'Come over, then. Sit, but just so you know, we're avoiding Seven Cities. There was a terrible plague there; no telling if it's run its course.'

'No,' the Trell rumbled as he approached, 'I have no desire to return to Seven Cities, or Nemil.'

The bench groaned as he settled on to it.

Sweetest Sufferance was eyeing the newcomer with a strangely avid intensity. Reccanto Ilk simply stared, mouth open, odd twitches of his scalp shifting his hairline up and down.

Faint said to the Trell, 'The truth of it is, we're really in no shape for anything . . . ambitious. Master Quell needs to put out a call for more shareholders, and that could hold us back for days, maybe a week.'

'Oh, that is unfortunate. It is said your Guild has an office here in Darujhistan—'

'It does, but I happen to know we're the only carriage available, for the next while. Where were you hoping to go, and how quickly?'

'Where is your Master, or are you the one who does the negotiating?'

At that moment Glanno finally succeeded in dragging Quell out from the water closet. The Master was pale, and shiny with sweat, and it seemed his legs weren't working very well. Faint met his slightly wild gaze. 'Better?' she asked.

'Better,' he replied in a gasp, as Glanno more or less carried him over to his chair. 'It was a damned kidney stone, it was. Size of a knuckle – I never thought . . . well, never mind. Gods, who is this?'

The Trell half rose to bow. 'Apologies. My name is Mappo Runt.' And he sat back down.

Faint saw Quell lick dry lips, and with a trembling hand reach for a tankard. He scowled to find it empty and set it back down. 'The most infamous Trell of them all. You lost him, didn't you?'

The barbarian's dark eyes narrowed. 'Ah, I see.'

'Where?' Quell's voice sounded half strangled.

'I need to get to a continent named Lether. To an empire ruled by Tiste Edur, and a cursed emperor. And yes, I can pay you for the trouble.'

Faint had never seen her master so rattled. It was fascinating. Clearly, Quell had recognized the Trell's name, which signified . . . well, something.

'And, er, did he face that emperor, Mappo? In ritual combat?'

'I do not think so.'

'Why?'

'I believe I would have . . . sensed such a thing—' 'The end of the world, you mean.'

'Perhaps. No, something else happened. I cannot say what, Master Quell. I need to know, will you take me there?'

'We're under-crewed,' Quell said, 'but I can drop by the office, see if there's a list of waiting prospects. A quick interview process. Say by this time tomorrow, I can have an answer.'

The huge warrior sighed. He glanced round. 'I have nowhere else to go, so I will stay here until then.'

'Sounds wise,' Quell said. 'Faint, you're with me. The rest of you, get cleaned up, see to the horses, carriage and all that. Then stay close by, keep

Mappo company – he might have nasty tusks but he don't bite.'

'But I do,' said Sweetest Sufferance, offering the Trell an inviting smile.

Mappo stared at her a moment, then, rubbing at his face, he rose. 'Where's that breakfast, anyway?'

'Let's go, Faint,' said Quell, pushing himself upright with another wince.

'Can you make it?' she asked him.

A nod. 'Haradas is handling the office these days – she can heal me quick enough.'

'Good point. Hands on?'

*

There is, as a legion of morose poets well know, nothing inconsequential about love. Nor all those peculiarities of related appetites often confused for love, for example lust, possession, amorous worship, appalling notions of abject surrender where one's own will is bled out in sacrifice, obsessions of the fetishistic sort that might include earlobes or toenails or regurgitated foodstuffs, and indeed that adolescent competitiveness which in adults – adults who should of course know better but don't – is manifested as insane jealousy.

Such lack of restraint has launched and no doubt sunk an equal number of ships, if one takes the long view of such matters, which in retrospect is not only advisable but, for all the sighs of worldly wind, probably the most essential survival trait of them all – but pray, let not this rounded self wallow unthinkingly into recounting a host of lurid tales of woe, loss and the like, nor bemoan his present solitude as anything other than a voluntary state of being!

Cast attention, then (with audible relief), upon these three for whom love heaves each moment like a volcano about to erupt, amidst the groan of continents, the convulsion of valleys and the furrowing of furrows – but no, honesty demands a certain revision to what steams and churns beneath the surface. Only two of the three thrash and writhe in the delicious agony of

that-which-might-be-love, and the subject of their fixed attention is none other than the third in their quaint trio, who, being of feminine nature, is yet to decide and, now that she basks in extraordinary attention, may indeed *never* decide. And should the two ever vying for her heart both immolate themselves at some future point, ah well, there are plenty of eels in the muck, aren't there?

And these three, then, bound together in war and bound yet tighter in the calamity of desire long after the war was done with, now find themselves in the fair city of Darujhistan, two pursuing one and where the one goes so too will they, but she wonders, yes, just how far she can take them and let's see, shall we?

Being illiterate, she has scrawled her name on to a list, assuming her name can be pictographically rendered into something like a chicken heart's spasm the moment before death, and lo, did not her two suitors follow suit, competing even here in their expressions of illiterate extravagance, with the first devising a most elaborate sigil of self that might lead one to imagine his name's being Smear of Snail in Ecstasy, whilst the other, upon seeing this, set to with brush, scrivener's dust and fingernails to fashion a scrawl reminiscent of a serpent trying to cross a dance floor whilst a tribe importuned the fickle gods of rain. Both men then stood, beaming with pride in between mutual baring of teeth, while their love sauntered off to find a nearby stall where an old woman wearing seaweed on her head was cooking stuffed voles over a brazier of coals.

The two men hastened after her, both desperate to pay for her breakfast, or beat the old woman senseless, whichever their darling preferred.

Thus it was that High Marshal Jula Bole and High Marshal Amby Bole, along with the swamp witch named Precious Thimble, all late of the Mott Irregulars, were close at hand and, indeed, ready and willing newfound shareholders when Master Quell and Faint arrived at the office of the Trygalle Trade Guild. And while three was not quite the number Quell sought by way of replacements, they would just have to do, given Mappo Runt's terrible need.

So they would not have to wait until the morrow after all. Most *consequential* indeed.

Happy days!

Conspiracies are the way of the civilized world, both those real and those imagined, and in all the perambulations of move and countermove, why, the veracity of such schemes is irrelevant. In a subterranean, most private chamber in the estate of Councilman Gorlas Vidikas sat fellow Council members Shardan Lim and Hanut Orr in the company of their worthy host, and the wine had flowed like the fount of the Queen of Dreams – or if not dreams then at least irresponsible aspirations – throughout the course of the night just past.

Still somewhat inebriated and perhaps exhausted unto satiation by self-satisfaction, they were comfortably silent, each feeling wiser than their years, each feeling that wellspring of power against which reason was helpless. In their half-lidded eyes something was swollen and nothing in the world was unattainable. Not for these three.

'Coll will be a problem,' Hanut said.

'Nothing new there,' Shardan muttered, and the other two granted him soft, muted laughter. 'Although,' he added as he played with a silver candle snuffer, 'unless we give him cause for suspicion, there is no real objection he can legitimately make. Our nominee is well enough respected, not to mention harmless, at least physically.'

'It's just that,' Hanut said, shaking his head, 'by virtue of us as nominators, Coll will be made suspicious.'

'We play it as we discussed, then,' Shardan responded, taunting with death the nearest candle's flame. 'Bright-eyed and full of ourselves and brazenly awkward, eager to express our newly acquired privilege to propose new Council members. We'd hardly be the first to be so clumsy and silly, would we?'

Gorlas Vidikas found his attention wandering – they'd gone through all this before, he seemed to recall. Again and again, in fact, through the course

of the night, and now a new day had come, and still they chewed the same tasteless grist. Oh, these two companions of his liked the sound of their own voices all too well. Converting dialogue into an argument even when both were in agreement, and all that distinguished the two was the word choices concocted in each reiteration.

Well, they had their uses none the less. And this thing he had fashioned here was proof enough of that.

And now, of course, Hanut once more fixed eyes upon him and asked yet again the same question, 'Is this fool of yours worth it, Gorlas? Why him? It's not as if we aren't approached almost every week by some new prospect wanting to buy our votes on to the Council. Naturally, it serves us better to string the fools along, gaining favour upon favour, and maybe one day deciding we own so much of them that it will be worth our while to bring them forward. In the meantime, of course, we just get richer and more influential *outside* the Council. The gods know, we can get pretty damned rich with *this* one.'

'He is not the type who will play the whore to our pimp, Hanut.'

A frown of distaste. 'Hardly a suitable analogy, Gorlas. You forget that you are the junior among us here.'

*The one who happens to own the woman you both want in your beds. Don't chide me about whores and pimps, when you know what you'll pay for her.* Such thoughts remained well hidden behind his momentarily chastened expression. 'He'll not play the game, then. He wants to attain the Council, and in return we shall be guaranteed his support when we make our move to shove aside the elder statesmen and their fossilized ways, and take the *real* power.'

Shardan grunted. 'Seems a reasonable arrangement, Hanut. I'm tired, I need some sleep.' And he doused the candle before him as he rose. 'Hanut, I know a new place for breakfast.' He smiled at Gorlas. 'I am not being rude in not inviting you, friend. Rather, I imagine your wife will wish to greet you this morning, with a breakfast you can share. The Council does not

meet until mid-afternoon, after all. Take your leisure, Gorlas, when you can.'

'I will walk you both out,' he replied, a smile fixed upon his face.

Most of the magic Lady Challice Vidikas was familiar with was of the useless sort. As a child she had heard tales of great and terrible sorcery, of course, and had she not seen for herself Moon's Spawn? On the night when it sank so low its raw underside very nearly brushed the highest rooftops, and there had been dragons in the sky then, and a storm to the east that was said to have been fierce magic born of some demonic war out in the Gadrobi Hills, and then the confused madness behind Lady Simtal's estate. But none of this had actually affected her directly. Her life had slipped through the world so far as most people's did, rarely touched by anything beyond the occasional ministrations of a healer. All she had in her possession was a scattering of ensorcelled items intended to do little more than entrance and amuse.

One such object was before her now, on her dresser, a hemisphere of near-perfect glass in which floated a semblance of the moon, shining as bright as it would in the night sky. The details on its face were exact, at least from the time when the real moon's visage had been visible, instead of blurred and uncertain as it was now.

A wedding gift, she recalled, although she'd forgotten from whom it had come. One of the less obnoxious guests, she suspected, someone with an eye to romance in the old-fashioned sense, perhaps. A dreamer, a genuine well-wisher. At night, if she desired darkness in the room, the half-globe needed covering, for its refulgent glow was bright enough to read by. Despite this inconvenience, Challice kept the gift, and indeed kept it close.

Was it because Gorlas despised it? Was it because, while it had once seemed to offer her a kind of promise, it had, over time, transformed into a symbol of something entirely different? A tiny moon, yes, shining ever so bright, yet there it remained, trapped with nowhere to go. Blazing its beacon like a cry for help, with an optimism that never waned, a hope that never died.

Now, when she looked upon the object, she found herself feeling claustrophobic, as if she was somehow sharing its fate. But *she* could not shine for ever, could she? No, her glow would fade, was fading even now. And so, although she possessed this symbol of what might be, her sense of it had grown into a kind of fascinated resentment, and even to look upon it, as she was doing now, was to feel its burning touch, searing her mind with a pain that was almost delicious.

All because it had begun feeding a desire, and perhaps this was a far more powerful sorcery than she had first imagined; indeed, an enchantment tottering on the edge of a curse. The burnished light breathed into her, filled her mind with strange thoughts and hungers growing ever more desperate for appeasement. She was being enticed into a darker world, a place of hedonistic indulgences, a place unmindful of the future and dismissive of the past.

It beckoned to her, promising the bliss of the ever-present moment, and it was to be found, she knew, *somewhere out there*.

She could hear her husband on the stairs, finally deigning to honour her with his company, although after a night's worth of drinking and all the manly mutual raising of hackles, verbal strutting and preening, he would be unbearable. She had not slept well and was, truth be told, in no mood for him (but then, she realized, she had been in no mood for him for some time, now – shock!), so she swiftly rose and went to her private changing room. A journey out into the city would suit her restlessness. Yes, to walk without purpose and gaze upon the detritus of the night's festivities, to be amused by the bleary eyes and unshaven faces and the last snarl of exhausted arguments.

And she would take her breakfast upon a terrace balcony in one of the more elegant restaurants, perhaps Kathada's or the Oblong Pearl, permitting her a view of the square and Borthen Park where servants walked watchdogs and nannies pushed two-wheeled prams in which huddled a new generation of the privileged, tucked inside nests of fine cotton and silk.

There, with fresh fruits and a carafe of delicate white wine, and perhaps even a pipe bowl, she would observe all the life meandering below, sparing

a thought (just once and then done with) for the dogs she didn't want and the children she didn't have and probably would never have, given Gorlas's predilections. To think, for a time, in a musing way, of his parents and their dislike of her – convinced that she was barren, no doubt, but no woman ever got pregnant from that place, did she? – and of her own father, now a widower, with his sad eyes and the smile he struggled to fashion every time he looked upon her. To contemplate, yet again, the notion of pulling her father aside and warning him – about what? Well, her husband, for one, and Hanut Orr and Shardan Lim for that matter. Dreaming of a great triumvirate of tyranny and undoubtedly scheming to bring it about. But then, he would laugh, wouldn't he? And say how the young Council members were all the same, blazing with ambition and conviction, and that their ascension was but a matter of time, as unstoppable as an ocean tide, and soon they would come to realize that and cease their endless plans of usurpation. Patience, he would tell her, is the last virtue learned. *Yes, but often too late to be of any value, dear Father. Look at you, a lifetime spent with a woman you never liked, and now, free at last, you find yourself grey, a fresh stoop to your shoulders, and you sleep ten bells every night—*

Such thoughts and others whilst she refreshed herself and began selecting her attire for the day. And in the bedroom beyond she heard Gorlas sit on the bed, no doubt unlacing his boots, knowing well that she was here in the tiny chamber and clearly not caring.

And what then would Darujhistan offer up to her this bright day? Well, she would see, wouldn't she?

She turned from watching her students in the compound and, eyes alighting upon him, she scowled. 'Oh, it's you.'

'This is the new crop, then? Apsalar's sweet kiss, Stonny.'

Her scowl turned wry and she walked past him into the shade of the colonnade, where she sat down on the bench beside the archway, stretching out her legs. 'I won't deny it, Gruntle. But it's something I've been noticing – the noble-born children are all arriving lazy, overweight and uninterested. Sword skill is something their fathers want for them, as obnoxious to them as lyre lessons or learning numbers. Most of them can't even hold up the

practice swords for longer than fifty heartbeats, and here it's expected I can work them into something worth more than snot in eight months. Apsalar's sweet kiss? Yes, I'll accept that. It *is* theft, all right.'

'And you're doing well by it, I see.'

She ran one gloved hand along her right thigh. 'The new leggings? Gorgeous, aren't they?'

'Stunning.'

'Black velvet doesn't work on any old legs, you know.'

'Not mine, anyway.'

'What do you want, Gruntle? I see the barbs have faded, at least. News was you were positively glowing when you came back.'

'A disaster. I need a new line of work.'

'Don't be ridiculous. It's the only thing you're remotely good at. Oafs like you need to be out there, chopping through the thick skulls of bandits and whatnot. Once you start staying put this city is doomed and it just so happens that I like living here, so the sooner you're back out on the trails the better.'

'I missed you too, Stonny.'

She snorted.

'Bedek and Myrla are well, by the way.'

'Stop right there.'

He sighed, rubbed at his face.

'I mean it, Gruntle.'

'Look, an occasional visit is all I'm asking—'

'I send money.'

'You do? That's the first I've heard of that. Not a mention from Bedek and from how they're doing, well, you can't be sending much, or very often.'

She glared at him. 'Snell meets me outside the door and the coins go right into his hands – I make sure, Gruntle. Anyway, how dare you? I made the adoption legal and so I don't owe them anything, damn you.'

'Snell. Well, that probably explains it. Next time try Myrla or Bedek, anyone but Snell.'

'You're saying the little shit is stealing it?'

'Stonny, they're barely scraping by, and, thinking on it, well, I know you well enough to know that, adoption or no, you won't see them starve – any of them, especially not your son.'

'Don't call him that.'

'Stonny—'

'The spawn of rape – I can see *his* face, right there in Harllo's own, looking up at me. I can see it clear, Gruntle.' And she shook her head, refusing to meet his eyes, and her legs had drawn up, tightly clenched, and all the bravado was gone as she clasped her arms tight about herself, and Gruntle felt his heart breaking yet again and there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say to make it any better, only worse.

'You'd better go,' she said in a tight voice. 'Come back when the world dies, Gruntle.'

'I was thinking about the Trygalle Trade Guild.'

Her head snapped round. 'Are you mad? Got a damned death wish?'

'Maybe I do.'

'Get out of my sight, then. Go on, run off and get yourself killed.'

'Your students look ready to keel over,' Gruntle observed. 'Repeated lunges aren't easy for anyone – I doubt any of them will be able to walk come the morrow.'

'Never mind them. If you're really thinking of signing on with the Trygalle, say it plain.'

'I thought you might talk me out of it.'

'Why would I bother? You got your life just like I got mine. We aren't married. We aren't even lovers—'

'Had any success in that area, Stonny? Someone might—'

'Stop this. Stop all of it. You're like this every time you come back from a bad one. All full of pity and damn near dripping with sanctimony while you try and try to convince me.'

'Convince you of what?'

'Being human, but I'm done with that. Stonny Menackis died years ago. What you're seeing now is a thief running a school teaching nothing to imps with piss in their veins. I'm just here to suck fools dry of their coin. I'm just here to lie to them about how their son or daughter is a champion duellist in the making.'

'So you won't be talking me out of signing with the Trygalle, then.' Gruntle turned to the archway. 'I see I do nothing good here. I'm sorry.'

But she reached out and grasped his forearm as he was about to leave. 'Don't,' she said.

'Don't what?'

'Take it from me, Gruntle, there's nothing good in a death wish.'

'Fine,' he said, then left.

Well, he'd messed it all up again. Nothing new in that, alas. *Should hunt down Snell, give him a shake or two. At the very least, scare the crap out of him. Get him to spill where he's been burying his hoard. No wonder he likes sitting on the threshold. Keeping an eye out, I suppose.*

Still, Gruntle kept coming back to all these unpleasant truths, the life he was busy wasting, the pointlessness of all the things he chose to care about – well, not entirely true. There was the boy, but then, the role of an occasional uncle could hardly be worth much, could it? What wisdom could he impart? Very little, if he looked back on the ruin of his life so far.

Companions dead or lost, followers all rotting in the ground, the ash-heaps of past battles and decades spent risking his life to protect the possessions of someone else, someone who got rich without chancing anything worthwhile. Oh, Gruntle might charge for his services, he might even bleed his employers on occasion, and why not?

Which was why, come to think on it, the whole thing with the Trygalle Trade Guild was starting to make sense to him. A shareholder was just that, someone with a stake in the venture, profiting by their own efforts with no fat fool in the wings waiting with sweaty hands.

Was this a death wish? Hardly. Plenty of shareholders survived, and the smart ones made sure they got out before it was too late, got out with enough wealth to buy an estate, to retire into a life of blissful luxury. Oh, that was just for him, wasn't it? *Well, when you're only good at one thing, then you stop doing it, what's left but doing nothing?*

With some snivelling acolyte of Treach scratching at his door every night. *'The Tiger of Summer would roar, Chosen One. Yet here you lie indolent in silk bedding. What of battle? What of blood and the cries of the dying? What of chaos and the reek of spilled wastes, the curling up round mortal wounds in the slime and mud? What of the terrible strife from which you emerge feeling so impossibly alive?'*

Yes, what of it? *Let me lie here, rumbling this deep, satisfied purr. Until war finds me, and if it never does, well, that's fine by me.*

Bah, he was fooling nobody, especially not himself. He was no soldier, true enough, but it seemed mayhem found him none the less. The tiger's curse, that even when it is minding its own business a mob of beady-eyed fools come chanting into the jungle, beating the ground. Was that true? Probably not, since there was no reason for hunting tigers, was there? He must have invented the scene, or caught a glimpse of Treach's own dreaming. Then again, did not hunters beard beasts of all sorts in their dens and caves and burrows? After some fatuous excuse about perils to livestock or whatever, off the mob went, eager for blood.

*Beard me, will you? Oh, please do* – and all at once, he found his mood changed, mercurial and suddenly seething with rage.

He was walking along a street, close now to his abode, yet the passers-by had all lost their faces, had become nothing more than mobile pieces of meat, and he wanted to kill them all.

A glance down at his hands and he saw the black slashes of the tiger's barbs deep as dusty jet, and he knew then that his eyes blazed, that his teeth were bared, the canines glistening, and he knew, too, why the amorphous shapes he passed were shrinking from his path. If only one would come close, he could lash out, open a throat and taste the salty chalk of blood on his tongue. Instead, the fools were rushing off, cringing in doorways or bolting down alleys.

Unimpressed, disappointed, he found himself at his door.

She didn't understand, or maybe she did all too well. Either way, she'd been right in saying he did not belong in this city, or any other. They were all cages, and the trick he'd never learned was how to be at peace living in a cage.

In any case, peace was overrated – look at Stonny, after all. *I take my share, my fortune, and I buy them a new life – a life with servants and such, a house with an enclosed garden where he can be carried out and sit in the sun. The children properly schooled; yes, some vicious tutor to take Snell by the throat and teach him some respect. Or if not respect, then healthy terror. And for Harllo, a chance at a future.*

*One should be all I need, and I can survive one, can't I? It's the least I can do for them. In the meantime, Stonny will take care of things – making sure the coin reaches Myrla.*

*Where did I see that damned carriage anyway?*

He was at his door again, this time facing the street. Loaded with travel gear, with weapons and his fur-lined rain-cloak – the new one that smelled like sheep – and so it was clear that some time had passed, but the sort that was inconsequential, that did nothing but what needed doing, with no

wasted thought. Nothing like hesitation, or the stolid weighing of possibilities, or the moaning back-and-forth that some might call wise deliberation.

Walking now, this too of little significance. Why, nothing had significance, until the moment when the claws are unsheathed, and the smell of blood gives bite to the air. And that moment waited somewhere ahead and he drew closer, step by step, because when a tiger decides it's time to hunt, it is time to hunt.

Snell came up behind his quarry, delighted by his own skill at stealth, at stalking the creature who sat in the high grasses all unknowing, proving that Harllo wasn't fit for the real world, the world where everything was a threat and needed taking care of lest it take care of you. It was the right kind of lesson for Snell to deliver, out here in the wilds.

He held in one hand a sack filled with the silver councils Aunt Stonny had brought, two linings of burlap and the neck well knotted so he could grip it tight. The sound the coins made when they struck the side of Harllo's head was most satisfying, sending a shock of thrill through Snell. And the way that hateful head snapped to one side, the small body pitching to the ground, well, that was a sight he would cherish.

He kicked at the unconscious form for a while, but without the grunts and whimpers it wasn't as much fun, so he left off. Then, collecting the hefty sack of dung, he set out for home. His mother would be pleased at the haul, and she'd plant a kiss on his forehead and he could bask for a time, and when someone wondered where Harllo had got to, why, he'd tell them he'd seen him down at the docks, talking with some sailor. When the boy didn't come home tonight, Myrla might send for Gruntle to go down and check the waterfront, where he'd find out that two ships had sailed that day, or three, and was there a new cabin boy on one of them? Maybe so, maybe not, who paid attention to such things?

Dismay, then, and worries, and mourning, but none of that would last long. Snell would become the precious one, the one still with them, the one they needed to take care of, protect and coddle. The way it used to be, the way it was supposed to be.

Smiling under the bright morning sun, with long-legged birds pecking mud on the flats out on the lake to his left, Snell ambled his way back home. A good day, a day of feeling so alive, so free. He had righted the world, the whole world.

The shepherd who found the small boy in the grasses of the summit overlooking the road into Maiten and the Two-Ox Gate was an old man with arthritic knees who knew his usefulness was coming to an end, and very soon indeed he would find himself out of work, the way the herdmaster watched him hobbling and leaning too much on his staff. Examining the boy, he was surprised to find him still alive, and this brought thoughts of what he might do with such an urchin in his care.

Worth the effort? He could bring his wife back here, with the cart, and together they could lift the body into the bed and wheel him back to their shack on the shore of the lake. Tend to him and see if he lived or died, feed him enough if it came to that, and then?

Well, he had thoughts, yes, plenty of thoughts on that. None of them pleasant, but then, whoever said the world was a pleasant place? Foundlings were fair game and that was a rule somewhere, he was sure of it, a rule, just like finding salvage on the beach. What you found you owned, and the money would do them good, besides.

He too concluded that it was a good day.

He remembered his childhood, running wild in the streets and alleys, clambering on to the rooftops at night to stare about in wonder at the infamous Thieves' Road. So inviting this romance of adventure under the moon's secret light, whilst slept all the dullards and might-be victims in the unlit rooms below.

Running wild, and for the child one road was as good as another, perhaps better so long as there was mystery and danger every step of the way. Even later, when that danger had become all too real, it had been for Cutter a life unfurling, revealing a heart saturated with wonder.

Romance was for fools, he now knew. No one valued the given heart, no one saw that sacrifice for the precious gift it was. No, just a thing to be

grasped, twisted by uncaring hands, then wrung dry and discarded. Or a commodity and nothing more, never as desirable as the next one, the one in waiting, or the one held by someone else. Or, something far worse, a gift too precious to accept.

The nature of the rejection, he told himself, was irrelevant. Pain and grief arrived in singular flavours, bitter and lifeless, and too much of them rotted the soul. He could have taken other roads. Should have. Maybe walked Murillio's path, a new love every night, the adoration of desperate women, elegant brunches on balconies and discreet rendezvous beneath whispering leaves in some private garden.

Or how about Kruppe? A most wily master to whom he could have apprenticed himself yet further than he already had, in the art of high thievery, in the disposition of stolen items, in the acquisition of valuable information available to whoever was willing to pay and pay well. In the proper appreciation of wines, pastries and inappropriate attire. A lifetime of cherubic delight, but was there really room in the world for more than one Kruppe?

Assuredly not!

Was it preferable, then, this path of daggers, this dance of shadows and the taking of lives for coin without even a soldier's sanction (as if that mattered)? Rallick would not agree. And Murillio would shake his head, and Kruppe waggle his eyebrows, and Meese might grin and make another grab for his crotch, with Irilta looking on with motherly regard. And there'd be that glow in Sulty's eyes, tinged now with the bitter truth that she was no longer enough for one such as him, that she could only dream, that somehow his being an assassin set him upon such a high station that her lowly existence as a serving wench was beneath all notice. Where even his efforts at friendship were perceived as pity and condescension, sufficient to pitch her into tears at the wrong word, the missed glance.

How the time for dreams of the future seemed to slip past unnoticed, until in reviving them a man realized, with a shock, that the privilege was no longer his to entertain, that it belonged to those younger faces he saw on all sides, laughing in the tavern and on the streets, *running wild.*

'You have changed,' Murillio said from the bed where he reclined, propped up on pillows, his hair hanging unbound and unwashed, 'and I'm not sure it's for the better.'

Cutter regarded his old friend for a moment, then asked, 'What's better?'

'What's better. You wouldn't have asked that question, and certainly not in that way, the last time I saw you.

Someone broke your heart, Crokus – not Challice D'Arle, I hope!'

Smiling, Cutter shook his head. 'No, and what do you know, I'd almost forgotten her name. Her face, certainly . . . and the name is Cutter now, Murillio.'

'If you say so.'

He just had, but clearly Murillio was worse for wear, not up to his usual standard of conversation. If he'd been making a point by saying that, well, maybe *Crokus* would've snatched the bait. *It's the darkness in my soul . . . no, never mind.*

'Seven Cities, was it? Took your time coming home.'

'A long journey, for the ship I was on. The north route, along the island chains, stuck in a miserable hovel of a port for two whole seasons – first winter storms, which we'd expected, then a spring filled with treacherous ice rafts, which we didn't – no one did, in fact.'

'Should have booked passage on a Moranth trader.'

Cutter glanced away. 'Didn't have a choice, not for the ship, nor for the company on it.'

'So you had a miserable time aboard?'

He sighed. 'Not their fault, any of them. In fact, I made good friends—'

'Where are they now, then?'

Cutter shrugged. 'Scattered about, I imagine.'

'Will we meet them?' Murillio asked.

He wondered at this line of questioning, found himself strangely irritated by Murillio's apparent interest in the people he had come back with. 'A few, maybe. Some stepped ashore only to leave again, by whatever means possible – so, not any of those. The others . . . we'll see.'

'Ah, I was just curious.'

'About what?'

'Well, which of your groups of friends you considered more embarrassing, I suppose.'

'Neither!'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to offend . . . Cutter. You're just seeming somewhat . . . restless, as if you'd rather be elsewhere.'

*It's not that easy.* 'It all feels . . . different. That's all. Bit of a shock, finding you nearly dead.'

'I imagine besting Rallick in a knife fight was rather shocking, as well.'

Cutter didn't much want to think about that. 'I could never have imagined that you'd lose a duel, Murillio.'

'Easy to do, when you're drunk and wearing no breeches.'

'Oh.'

'Actually, neither of those is relevant to my present situation. I was careless. Why was I careless? Because I'm getting old. Because it's all slowing down. *I'm* slowing down. Look at me, lying here, healed up but full of aches, old pains, and nothing but cold ashes in my soul. I've been granted a second chance and I intend to take it.'

'Meaning?'

Murillio shot him a look. Seemed about to say something, then changed his mind and said something else. 'I'm going to retire. True, I've not saved up much, but then, I should be able to live with more modest expectations, shouldn't I? There's a new duelling school in the Daru. I've heard it's doing

rather well, long lists of applicants and all that. I could help out, a couple of days a week.'

'No more widows. No more clandestine trysts.'

'Precisely.'

'You'll make a good instructor.'

'Not likely,' he replied with a grimace, 'but I have no aspirations to be one, either. It's work, that's all. Footwork, forms, balance and timing – the more serious stuff they can get from someone else.'

'If you go in there talking like that,' Cutter said, 'you'll never get hired.'

'I've lost my ability to charm?'

Cutter sighed and rose from his chair. 'I doubt it.'

'What brought you back?' Murillio asked.

The question stopped him. 'A conceit, maybe.'

'What kind of conceit?'

*The city is in danger. It needs me.* 'Oh,' he said, turning to the door, 'the childish kind. Be well, Murillio – I think your idea is a good one, by the way. If Rallick drops by looking for me, tell him I'll be back later.'

He took the back stairs, went through the dank, narrow kitchen, and out into the alley, where the chill of the night just past remained in the air. He did need to speak to Rallick Nom, but not right now. He felt slightly punchdrunk. The shock of his return, he supposed, the clash inside himself between who he had once been and who he was now. He needed to get settled, to get the confusion from his mind. If he could begin to see clearly again, he'd know what to do.

Out into the city, then, to wander. Not quite *running wild*, was it?

No, those days were long gone.

The wound had healed quickly, reminding him that there had been changes – the powder of otataral he had rubbed into his skin only a few days ago, or

so it seemed. To begin a night of murder now years past. The other changes, however, were proving far more disconcerting. He had lost so much time. Vanished from the world, and the world just went on without him. As if Rallick Nom had been dead, yes – no different from that, only now he was back, which wasn't how things should be. *Pull a stick from the mud and the mud closes in to swallow up the hole, until no sign remains that the stick ever existed.*

Was he still an assassin of the Guild? Not at the moment, and this truth opened to him so many possibilities that his mind reeled, staggered back to the simpler notion of descending into the catacombs, walking up to Seba Krafar and announcing his return; resuming, yes, his old life.

And if Seba was anything like old Talo, he would smile and say *welcome back, Rallick Nom.* From that moment the chances that Rallick would make it back out alive were virtually non-existent. Seba would see at once the threat standing before him. Vorcan had favoured Rallick and that alone was sufficient justification for getting rid of him. Seba wanted no rivals – he'd had enough of those if Krute's tale of the faction war was accurate.

He had another option when it came to the Guild. Rallick could walk in and kill Seba Krafar, then announce he was interim Master, awaiting Vorcan's return. Or he could stay in hiding for as long as possible, waiting for Vorcan to make her own move. Then, with her ruling the nest once again, he could emerge out of the woodwork and those missing years would be as nothing, would be without meaning. That much he shared with Vorcan, and because of that she would trust no one but Rallick. He'd be second in command, and how could he not be satisfied with that?

Oh, this was an old crisis – years old now. His thought that Turban Orr would be the last person he killed had been as foolish then as it was now.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his room. From the taproom below he could hear Kruppe expounding on the glories of breakfast, punctuated by some muted no doubt savage commentary by Meese, and with those two it was indeed as if nothing had changed. The same could not be said for Murillio, alas. Nor for Crokus, who was now named Cutter – an assassin's name for certain, all too well suited to the man Crokus had become. *Now*

*who taught him to fight with knives like that? Something of the Malazan style – the Claw, in fact.*

Rallick had been expecting Cutter to visit, had been anticipating the launch of a siege of questions. He would want to explain, wouldn't he? Try to justify his decisions to Rallick, even when there was no possible justification. *He didn't listen to me, did he? Ignored my warnings. Only fools think they can make a difference.* So, where was he? *With Murillio, I expect, holding off on the inevitable.*

A brief knock at the door and Irilta entered – she'd been living hard of late, he could see, and such things seemed to catch up faster with women than with men – though when men went they went quickly. 'Brought you breakfast,' she said, carrying a tray over. 'See? I remembered it all, right down to the honey-soaked figs.'

*Honey-soaked figs?* 'Thank you, Irilta. Let Cro— er, Cutter know that I'd like to see him now.'

'He went out.'

'He did? When?'

She shrugged. 'Not so long ago, according to Murillio.' She paused for a hacking cough that reddened her broad face.

'Find yourself a healer,' Rallick said when she was done.

'Listen,' she said, opening the door behind her, 'I ain't got no regrets, Rallick. I ain't expecting any god's kiss on the other side, and ain't nobody gonna say of Irilta she didn't have no fun when she was alive, no sir.'

She added something else but since she was in the corridor and closing the door Rallick didn't quite catch it.

Might have been something like *'try chewin' on that lesson some . . .'*, but then, she'd never been the edgy one, had she?

He looked down at the tray, frowned, then picked it up and rose.

Out into the corridor, balancing it one-handed while he lifted the latch of the next door along and walked into Murillio's room.

'This is yours,' Rallick said. 'Honey-soaked figs, your favourite.'

A grunt from Murillio on the bed. 'Explains these strips of spiced jerky – you are what you eat, right?'

'You're not nearly as sweet as you think, then,' Rallick said, setting the tray down. 'Poor Irilta.'

'Poor Irilta nothing – that woman's crowded more into her years than all the rest of us combined, and so now she's dying but won't bother with any healer because, I think, she's ready to leave.' He shook his head as he reached for the first glazed fig. 'If she knew you were pitying her, she'd probably kill you for real, Rallick.'

'Missed me, did you?'

A pause, a searching glance, then Murillio bit into the fig.

Rallick went and sat down in one of the two chairs crowding the room along with the bed. 'You spoke to Cutter?'

'Somewhat.'

'I thought he'd come to see me.'

'Did you now?'

'The fact that he didn't shouldn't make me think he got scared, should it?'

Murillio slowly shook his head.

Rallick sighed. Then he said, 'Saw Coll last night – so our plan worked. He got his estate back, got his name back, his self-respect. You know, Murillio, I didn't think anything could work out so well. So . . . perfectly. How in Hood's name did we ever manage such a thing?'

'That was a night for miracles all right.'

'I feel . . . lost.'

'Not surprising,' Murillio replied, reaching for another fig. 'Eat some of that jerky – the reek is making me nauseated.'

'Better on my breath?'

'Well, I don't see us kissing any time soon.'

'I'm not hungry,' Rallick said. 'I was when I first woke up, I think, but that faded.'

'Woke up – you slept all that time in the Finnest House? All tucked up in bed?'

'On stone, just inside the door. With Vorcan lying right beside me, apparently. She wasn't there when I came round. Just an undead Jaghut.'

Murillio seemed to think about that for a while, then said, 'So, what now, Rallick Nom?'

'Wish I knew.'

'Baruk might need things done, like before.'

'You mean, like guarding Cutter's back? Keeping an eye on Coll? And how long before the Guild learns I'm back? How long before they take me down?'

'Ah, the Guild. Well, I'd figured you'd just head straight in, toss a few dozen lifeless bodies around and resume your rightful place. With Vorcan back . . . well, it seems obvious to me what needs doing.'

'That was never my style, Murillio.'

'I know, but circumstances change.'

'Don't they just.'

'He'll be back,' Murillio said. 'When he's ready to talk to you. Keep in mind, he's gone and collected some new scars, deep ones. Some of them still bleeding, I think.' He paused, then said, 'If Mammot hadn't died, well, who knows what might have happened. Instead, he went off with the Malazans, to return Apsalar to her home – oh, I see you have no idea what

I'm talking about. All right, let me tell you the story of how that night ended – after you left. Just eat that damned jerky, please!'

'You drive a damned hard bargain, friend.'

And for the first time that morning, he saw Murillio smile.

Her scent clung to the bedding, sweet enough to make him want to weep, and even some of her warmth remained, or maybe that was just the sun, the golden light streaming in from the window and carrying with it the vaguely disturbing sound of birds mating in the tree in the back yard. *No need to be so frantic, little ones. There's all the time in the world.* Well, he would be feeling that right now, wouldn't he?

She was working the wheel in the outer room, a sound that had once filled his life, only to vanish and now, at long last, return. As if there had been no sordid crimes of banditry and the slavery that came as reasonable punishment, as if there had been no rotting trench lying shackled alongside Teblor barbarians. No huge warrior hanging from a cross amidships, with Torvald trickling brackish water between the fool's cracked lips. No sorcerous storms, no sharks, no twisted realms to crawl in and out of. No dreams of drowning – no, all that had been someone else's life, a tale sung by a half-drunk bard, the audience so incredulous they were moments from rage, ready to tear the idiot to pieces at the recounting of just one more unlikely exploit. Yes, someone else's life. The wheel was spinning, as it always did, and she was working clay and giving it form, symmetry, beauty. Of course, she never did her best work the day after a night of lovemaking, as if she'd used up something essential, whatever it was that fed creativity, and sometimes he felt bad about that. She'd laugh and shake her head, dismissing his concerns, spinning the wheel yet harder.

He'd seen, on the shelves of the outer room, scores of mediocre pots. Should this fact bother him? It might have, once, but no longer. He had vanished from her life – no reason, however, for her to waste away in some lonely vigil or prolonged period of mourning. People got on with things, and so they should. Of course she'd taken lovers. Might still have them, in fact, and it had been something of a miracle that she'd been alone when he showed up – he'd half expected some over-muscled godling with tousled

golden locks and the kind of jaw that just begged to be punched to answer the door.

'Maybe he's visiting his mother,' Torvald mumbled.

He sat up, swung his legs round and settled feet on the woven mat covering the floor. Noticed that flat pillows had been sewn on to the mat, stuffed with lavender that crackled under his feet. 'No wonder her feet smell nice.' Anyway, he didn't mind what she'd been up to all that time. Didn't even mind if she was still up to a few things now, though those things might make things a little crowded. 'Things, right.'

The day had begun, and all he needed to do was settle up certain matters and then he could resume his life as a citizen of Darujhistan. Maybe visit a few old friends, some members of his estranged family (the ones who'd talk to him, anyway), see the sights that'd make him the most nostalgic, and give some thought to what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

But first things first. Pulling on his foreign-cut clothes (the clean set, that had dried in a rather wrinkled state, alas), Torvald Nom made his way to the outer room. Her back was to him as she hunched over the wheel, legs pumping the pedals. He saw the large bowl of clean water where it always was, went over and splashed his face. Was reminded that he needed a shave – but now he could actually pay someone else to do such things. To the opportunistic shall come rewards. Someone had said that, once, he was sure.

'My sweetness!'

She half turned and grinned at him. 'Look how bad this is, Tor. See what you've done?'

'It's the temper, of course—'

'It's tired thighs,' she said.

'A common complaint?' he asked, walking alongside the shelves and leaning in to study a stack of misaligned plates.

'Pretty rare, actually. What you think you're seeing up there, husband, isn't. It's the new style everyone wants these days. Symmetry is dead, long live the clumsy and crooked. Every noble lady wants a poor cousin in the country, some aunt or great-aunt with stubby fingers who makes crockery for her kin, in between wringing chicken necks and husking gourds.'

'That's a complicated lie.'

'Oh, it's never actually stated, Tor, only implied.'

'I was never good at inferring what's implied. Unless it's implicitly inferred.'

'I've had precisely two lovers, Tor, and neither one lasted more than a few months. Want their names?'

'Do I know them?'

When she didn't reply he glanced over and found her looking at him. 'Ah,' he said wisely.

'Well, so long as you don't start squinting at everyone who comes in here or says hello to me on the street – if that's going to be the case, then I'd better tell you—'

'No, no, darling. In fact, the mystery is . . . intriguing. But that won't survive my actually knowing.'

'That's true. Which is why I won't be asking you about anything. Where you've been, what you've done.'

'But that's different!'

Her brows rose.

'No, really,' Torvald said, walking over. 'What I told you last night, I wasn't exaggerating.'

'If you say so.'

He could see that she didn't believe him. 'I am stung. Crushed.'

'You'd better get going,' Tiserra said, returning once more to the lump of clay on the wheel. 'You've got a debt to clear.'

'The loot's not sticky?'

'It's all clean as can be, I made sure. Unless Gareb's scratched secret sigils on every coin he owned he won't know either way. He might suspect, though.'

'I've got a good tale to explain all that, if necessary,' Torvald said. 'Foreign investments, unexpected wealth, a triumphant return.'

'Well, I'd tone down the new version, Tor.'

He regarded her, noting her amusement, and said nothing. What was the point? *That giant whose life I saved more than once, his name was Karsa Orlong. Do you think I could make up a name like that, Tis? And what about these shackle scars? Oh, it's the new style among the highborn, enforced humility and all that.*

Oh, it didn't matter anyway. 'I don't plan on meeting Gareb in person,' he said as he walked to the front door. 'I'll work through Scorch and Leff.'

The lump of wet clay slid off the wheel and splatted on the wall, where it clung for a moment, then oozed down to glom on to the floor.

Surprised, Torvald turned to his wife and saw the expression that he hadn't seen in . . . in . . . well, in quite a while. 'Wait!' he cried. 'That partnership is over with, I swear it! Darling, they're just acting as my go-between, that's all—' 'You start scheming with those two again, Torvald Nom, and I'll take out a contract on you myself.'

'They always liked you, you know.'

'Torvald—'

'I know, my love, I know. Don't worry. No more scheming with Scorch and Leff. That's a promise. We're rich now, remember?'

'The problem with lists,' Scorch said, 'is all the names on 'em.'

Leff nodded. 'That's the problem, all right. You got it dead on there, Scorch. All them names. They must've had some kind of meeting, don't you think? All the loansharks in some crowded, smoky room, lounging about with nubile women dropping grapes in their mouths, and some scribe with stained lips scratching away. Names, people down on their luck, people so stupid they'd sign anything, grab the coin no matter how insane the interest. Names, you got it, Scorch, a list of fools. Poor, dumb, desperate fools.'

'And then,' Scorch said, 'when the list is done, out it goes, for some other poor, dumb, desperate fools to take on.'

'Hey now, we ain't poor.'

'Yes we are. We been poor ever since Torvald Nom vanished on us. He was the brains – admit it, Leff. Now, you tried being the brains ever since and look where it's got us, with a damned list and all those names.'

Leff raised a finger. 'We got Kruppe, though, and he's already given us six of 'em.'

'Which we passed on and you know what that means? It means thugs kicking in the door in the middle of the night, delivering threats and maybe worse. People got hurt 'cause of us, Leff. Bad hurt.'

'They got hurt because they couldn't pay up. Unless you decide to run, and I do mean run, as in out of the city, as in hundreds of leagues away to some town or city with no connections to here, but people don't do that and why not? Because they're all caught up, tangled in the nets, and they can't see their way clear because they got husbands and wives and children and maybe it's hard but at least it's familiar, you know what I mean?'

'No.'

Leff blinked. 'I was just saying—'

'What did they think they were doing, to get caught up in nets – swimmin' the lake? Besides, not all of it's loans, is it? There's blackmail, too, which gives me a thought or two—'

'No way, Scorch. I don't want in on anything like that.'

'I'm just suggesting we talk to Tor about it, that's all. See what he conjures up in the way of plans and such.'

'Assuming Tor ever shows up.'

'He will, you'll see, Leff. He was our partner, wasn't he? And he's back.'

The conversation ended abruptly, for no reason obvious to either of them, and they stood looking at each other for a dozen heartbeats. They were opposite the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. It was morning, when they did their best thinking, but that had a way of dying quick, so that by late afternoon they would find themselves sitting somewhere, sluggish as tortoises in a hailstorm, arguing about nothing in particular with monosyllabic brevity and getting angrier by the moment.

Without another word they both went into the Phoenix Inn.

Clumped inside, looking round – just to be sure – then heading over to where sat Kruppe, plump hands upraised and hovering like hooded snakes, then striking down to one of dozens of pastries heaped on numerous platters in front of him. Fingertip fangs spearing hapless sweets right and left, each one moving in a blur up to his mouth, gobbled up in a shower of crumbs one after another.

Mere moments later and half the offerings were gone. Kruppe's cheeks bulged, his jam-smeared lips struggling to close as he chewed and frantically swallowed, pausing to breathe loudly through his nose. Seeing Scorch and Leff approaching, he waved mutely, gesturing them into their seats.

'You're going to explode one day, Kruppe,' said Leff.

Scorch stared with his usual expression of rapt disbelief.

Kruppe finally managed to swallow everything down, and he raised his hands once more, left them to hover whilst he eyed his two guests. 'Blessed partners, is this not a wondrous morning?'

'We ain't decided yet,' Leff said. 'We're still waiting for Torvald – he had a runner find us down at the docks and said he'd meet us here. He's already

changing things all round, like maybe he don't trust us. It's a blow, I tell you, Kruppe. A real blow.'

'Conflagration of suspicions climbing high into yon blue sky is quite unnecessary, shifty-eyed friends of wise Kruppe. Why, infamous and almost familiar offspring of House Nom is true to his word, and Kruppe asserts – with vast confidence – that the first name is about to be struck from dire list!'

'First? What about the six—'

'You've not heard? Oh, my. Each had flown, only moments before the cruel night-beaters closed in. Most extraordinary ill-luck.'

Scorch clawed at his face. 'Gods, we're back where we began!'

'That's impossible, Kruppe! Someone must've tipped 'em off!'

Kruppe's gnarled brows lifted, then waggled. 'Veracity of your discoveries is not in doubt, you will be pleased to hear. Thusly, you have succeeded in your task with said six, whilst they who compiled the list have, alas, not quite matched your rate of success. And so, how many remain? Twelve, yes? Not counting sleep-addled Torvald Nom, that is.'

'He ain't no sleep-addered or whatever,' Scorch said. 'In fact, he looked just fine yesterday.'

'Perhaps glorious reunion has sapped all verve, then. Kruppe assumed sleep-addered indeed, given the man's hapless and ineffectual perusal of this taproom – ah, at last he sees us!'

And both Scorch and Leff twisted round in their chairs to see Torvald Nom sauntering up and, noting the man's broad smile, they were instantly relieved and then, just as quickly, nervous.

'My apologies for being late,' Torvald said, dragging up another chair. 'I got a shave and the old woman threw in the buffing of my nails for free – said I was surprisingly handsome under all those whiskers and if that's not a good start to a day then what is? True, she was about a thousand years old, but hey, compliments don't have to be pretty, do they? And you're Kruppe.

You must be – who else in this city tries to eat with his nose when his mouth is filled? I'm Torvald Nom.'

'Sit, newfound friend. Kruppe is generous enough this morning to disregard dubious observation regarding his eating habits and the habits of his orifices. Kruppe further observes that you, while once a poor destitute man, have suddenly acquired impressive wealth, so finely attired and groomed are you, and that with great relief friends Scorch and Leff are soon to pay a most propitious visit to one Gareb the Lender. And on this of all days, one suspects Gareb to be most gracious at repayment of said debt, yes?'

Torvald stared at Kruppe, evidently speechless with admiration.

Kruppe's left hand darted down, captured a puff pastry that indeed might have been trying to escape, and pushed it whole into his mouth. Beaming, he chewed.

'You got the money?' Leff asked Torvald.

'What? Oh. Here,' and he drew out a pouch. 'In full. Kruppe, you are witness to this, so don't try anything, Leff. Nor you either, Scorch. Walk it straight over to Gareb's. Get the chit saying I'm cleared, too. Then come straight back here and I'll buy you all lunch.'

Scorch was looking back and forth between Torvald and Kruppe, and finally of the latter he asked, 'What was that you said about Gareb?'

Kruppe swallowed, licked his lips, and said, 'Why, only that a dastardly thief broke into his estate last night and stole his entire hoard. The poor man! And 'tis said the thief stole much more than that – why, the wife's dignity, too, or at least her innocence in so far as non-marital intercourse is concerned.'

'Hold on,' Leff said. 'The thief slept with Gareb's wife? Where was Gareb?'

'At a moneylenders' meeting, Kruppe understands, discussing important matters and, no doubt, eating his fill of grapes and whatnot.'

'Well then,' Torvald Nom said, 'won't he be happy I've returned to repay my debt.'

'Won't he just!' said Kruppe, beaming once more.

Leff took the bag of coins and peered inside. 'All there?'

'All there,' Torvald replied.

Leff rose and said, 'Let's get this done with, Scorch.'

When the two were gone, Torvald Nom sat back in his chair and smiled at Kruppe.

Who smiled back.

And when that was done with, Kruppe collected another pastry and held it before his mouth, in order to more closely observe its delight, and perhaps torture it a moment before his mouth opened like a bear's jagged maw. Poised thus, he paused to glance over at Torvald Nom. 'Upstairs, dear sir, you shall find, if you so desire, a cousin of renown. Like you, suddenly returned to fair Darujhistan. None other than Rallick, among the Noms of House Nom one might presume a sheep blacker than you. Indeed, the very black of nadir, the Abyss, whilst you might reveal a lesser black, such as charcoal. Two sheep, then, in this very inn, of a very dark hue – why, could Kruppe but witness such a meeting!' And time now to lift an admonishing finger. 'But listen, dear friend Torvald Nom, most clandestine is Rallick's return, yes? Seal thy lips, I beg you!'

'He's in hiding? Who from?'

A flutter of pudgy fingers, like worms in a reef-bed.

'Quick, then, lest he depart on some fell errand. Kruppe will save your seat here against your return – he so looks forward to the sumptuous lunch for which Torvald will pay and pay happily!'

Torvald was suddenly sweating, and he fidgeted in the chair. 'The reunion can, er, wait. Really, why would I want to bother him right now? No, honest, Kruppe, and as for secret, well, I'll keep it just fine, provided you, er, do the same. Say nothing to Rallick, I mean. Let me . . . surprise him!'

'Rallick has little love for surprises, Torvald Nom, as you must surely know. Why, just last night he—'

'Just don't say anything, all right?'

'Oh, aren't conspiracies delicious? Kruppe will say nothing to no one, none to worry no matter what. This is a most solemn promise most solemnly promised! Now, old friend, be so good as to accost yon Meese o'er there – some wine to loosen the throats prior to vast meal, yes? Kruppe's mouth salivates and, perhaps, so too sniffles his nose – all in anticipation, yes?'

'If this is what I want, then I don't want it.'

'Oh, now that makes sense, Antsy. And if you happen to be a short bow-legged red-faced crab of a man, well, you'd rather be a short bow-legged red-faced crab of a—'

'You're an idiot, Bluepearl, and that don't change no matter what you want. What I'm saying is simple, right? Even you should grasp the meaning. A soldier retires, right? And looks to a life all simple and peaceful, but is it?'

'Is it which?'

'What?'

'Is it simple or is it peaceful?'

'It isn't and that's my point!'

'That wasn't your point. Your point was you don't want it and if that's the case, then head on over to the Malazan Embassy and throw yourself on the mercy of whoever and if they don't hang you they'll sign you up all over again.'

'The point *was*, I'd like being retired if I only could be!'

'I'm going to the cellar to check on stock.'

Antsy watched him leave, then snorted and shook his head. 'That man needs help.'

'So go help him,' Blend said from the next table over.

Antsy jumped in his seat, then glared at her. 'Stop doing that! Anyway, I didn't mean that kind of help. Oh, gods, my head aches.'

'Sometimes,' Blend said, 'I try to make myself as quiet as possible because that way the military marching band in my skull maybe won't find me.'

'Huh,' said Antsy, brows knitting. 'Never knew you played an instrument, Blend. Which one?'

'Pipes, drums, flute, rattle, horn, waxstring.'

'Really? All at once?'

'Of course. You know, I think I'd be annoyed if I headed upstairs and found Picker creeping out of Scillara's room right about now.'

'So stay sitting right there.'

'Well, it's only my imagination inventing the scene.'

'You sure?'

She lasted four or five heartbeats before swearing under her breath and rising.

Antsy watched her leave, then smiled. 'It's better,' he said to no one, 'when you don't have an imagination. Like me.' He paused, scowled. 'Mind, could be I could use one right about now, so I could figure out how and when them assassins are gonna try again. Poison. Magic. Knives. Crossbow quarrels in the night, through the window, right through the shutters, a perfect shot. Thump to the floor goes Antsy, the Hero of Mott Wood. A spear up through that floor just to finish him off, since they been tunnelling for weeks and was waiting, knowing he'd fall right there right then, aye.'

He sat, eyes wide, red moustache twitching.

Sitting in the shadows in the far corner, back resting against the wall, Duiker watched with wry amusement. Extraordinary, how some people survived and others didn't. The soldier's face was always the same once the mask fell away – a look of bemusement, the faint bewildered surprise to

find oneself still alive, knowing all too well there was no good reason for it, nothing at all but the nudge of luck, the emptiness of chance and circumstance. And all the unfairness of the world made a bitter pool of the eyes.

A commotion from the back room and a moment later the narrow door opened and out walked the bard, grey hair tousled by sleep, eyes red even at this distance. A glance over at Antsy. 'There's lice in the mattress,' he said.

'I doubt they mind the company,' the ex-sergeant replied, levering himself upright and making for the stairs.

The bard stared after him for a moment, then headed over to the bar, where he poured himself a tankard of pungent, dark Rhivi beer. And came over to where sat Duiker.

'Historians and bards both,' he said, sitting down.

Duiker nodded, understanding well enough.

'But what you observe and what I observe, well, that can turn out quite differently. Then again, maybe the distinction is merely superficial. The older I get, the more I suspect just that. You describe events, seeing the great sweep of things. I look at the faces, rushing by so fast they might be no more than a blur if I don't take care. To see them true, to remember them all.'

'Where are you from?' Duiker asked.

The bard drank down a mouthful and set the tankard carefully before him. 'Korel, originally. But that was a long time ago.'

'Malazan invasion?'

An odd smile as the man studied the tankard on the table before him. His hands, however, remained in his lap. 'If you mean Greymane, then yes.'

'So which of the countless contradictory tales are true? About him, I mean.'

The bard shrugged. 'Never ask that of a bard. I sing them all. Lies, truths, the words make no distinction in what they tell, nor even the order they come in. We do as we please with them.'

'I've been listening to you these past few nights,' said Duiker.

'Ah, an audience of one. Thank you.'

'You've sung verses of *Anomandaris* I've never heard before.'

'The unfinished ones?' The bard nodded and reached for the tankard. '"Black Coral, where stand the Tiste Andii . . ."' He drank another mouthful.

'Have you come from there, then?'

'Did you know that there is no god or goddess in all the pantheon that claims to be the patron – or matron – of bards? It's as if we've been forgotten, left to our own devices. That used to bother me, for some reason, but now I see it for the true honour it represents. We have been made unique, in our freedom, in our responsibility. Is there a patron of historians?'

'Not that I'm aware of. Does this mean I'm free, too?'

'It's said you told the tale of the Chain of Dogs once, here in this very room.'

'Once.'

'And that you have been trying to write it down ever since.'

'And failing. What of it?'

'It may be that expositional prose isn't right for the telling of that story, Duiker.'

'Oh?'

The bard set the tankard to one side and slowly leaned forward, fixing the historian with grey eyes. 'Because, sir, you see their faces.'

Anguish welled up inside Duiker and he looked away, hiding his suddenly trembling hands. 'You don't know me well enough for such matters,' he said in a rasp.

'Rubbish. This isn't a personal theme here, historian. It's two professionals discussing their craft. It's me, a humble bard, offering my skills to unlock your soul and all it contains – everything that's killing it, moment by moment. You can't find your voice for this. Use mine.'

'Is that why you're here?' Duiker asked. 'Like some vulture eager to lap up my tears?'

Brows lifted. 'You are an accident. My reasons for being here lie . . . elsewhere. Even if I could explain more, I would not. I cannot. In the meantime, Duiker, let us fashion an epic to crush the hearts of a thousand generations.'

And now, yes, tears rolled down the lined tracks of the historian's face. And it took all the courage he still possessed to then nod.

The bard leaned back, retrieving his tankard. 'It begins with you,' he said. 'And it ends with you. Your eyes to witness, your thoughts alone. Tell me of no one's mind, presume nothing of their workings. You and I, we tell nothing, we but *show.'*

'Yes.' Duiker looked up, back into those eyes that seemed to contain – and hold sure – the grief of the world. 'What's your name, bard?'

'Call me Fisher.'

Chaur was curled up at the foot of the bed, snoring, twitching like a dreaming dog. Picker observed him for a moment before settling back on the mattress. How had she got here? Was that raw tenderness between her legs what she thought it was and if so then did Barathol remember as little of it as she did? Oh, too complicated to work out. She wasn't ready to be thinking of all those things, she wasn't ready to be thinking at all.

She heard someone moving down the hall. Then a muted conversation, punctuated by a throaty laugh that did not belong to Blend or anyone else Picker knew, meaning it was probably that woman, Scillara. Picker gasped slightly at a sudden recollection of holding the woman's breasts in her hands and hearing that laugh but up close and a lot more triumphant.

*Gods, did I sleep with them all? Damn that Quorl Milk!*

A wheeze from Chaur and she started guiltily – but no, she'd not do any such thing to an innocent like him. There were limits – there had to be limits.

A muffled knock on the door.

'Oh, come in, Blend.'

And in she came, light-footed as a cat, and her expression seemed filled up with something, on the verge of bursting.

*No, not tears, please.* 'I don't remember nothing, Blend, so don't start on me.'

Blend held back a moment longer, then erupted.

In howling laughter, bending over in convulsions.

Chaur sat up on the floor, blinking and smiling, then he too was laughing.

Picker glared at Blend, wanting to kill her. 'What's so damned funny?'

Blend managed to regain control over herself. 'They pretty much carried us all the way back. But then we woke up and we all had one thing and one thing only on our minds. They didn't stand a chance!'

'Gods below.' Then she stiffened. 'Not Chaur—'

'No, Scillara got him in here first.'

Chaur was still laughing, tears rolling down his face. He seemed to be losing control and all at once Picker felt alarmed. 'Stop now, Chaur! Stop!'

The wide empty eyes fixed on her, and all mirth vanished.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It's all right. Go down to the kitchen and get something to eat, Chaur, there's a lad.'

He rose, stretched, scratched himself, then left the room. He barked one last laugh somewhere near the stairs.

Picker rubbed at her face. 'Not Antsy, too. Don't tell me . . .'

Blend shrugged. 'Lust is blind, I suppose. And let's hope all memory of it stays that way. I fear all his fantasies came true last night . . . only he can't remember any of it!'

'I feel sick.'

'Oh, relax, it's what all those parts are made for, after all.'

'Where is Barathol?'

'Went out early. With Mallet for company. Looking for the Blacksmiths' Guild. You must remember his big, er, hands.'

'My kitten remembers, all right.'

Another snort from Blend. 'Meow.'

The grey gloom of the cellar seemed to defy the lantern's light, but Bluepearl was used to that, and he was only marginally surprised when the ghost shuffled out from the wall at the far end where rested a half-dozen casks still sealed by the monks' sigil. Sunk to his hips in the floor, the ghost paused and looked round, finally spying the Malazan standing near the steep stone steps.

The ghost waded closer. 'Is that you, Fellurkanath?'

'Fella what? You're dead, monk, and you've been dead for some time, I'd wager – who wears tri-cornered hats these days?'

'Oh,' the ghost moaned, clutching his face, 'K'rul has coughed me out. Why? Why now? I've nothing useful to tell, especially not to any foreigner. But he's stirring below, isn't he? Is that why? Am I to be the voice of dire warning? What do you care? It's already too late anyway.'

'Someone's trying to murder us.'

'Of course they are. You're squatting and they don't want company. You should broach a cask, one of these. That will tell you everything you need to know.'

'Oh, really now. Go away.'

'Who raised the floor and why? And look at this.' The ghost pushed his head back to reveal that his throat had been sliced open, all the way back to his spine. Gory, bloodless flesh and slashed veins and arteries vaguely silver in the dim light. 'Was this the ultimate sacrifice? Little do you know.'

'Do I need to get a necromancer down here?' Bluepearl demanded. 'Go away!' 'The living never heed the dead,' muttered the ghost, lowering his head and turning round to walk back towards the far wall. 'And that's just it. If we didn't know better, why, we'd be still alive. Think about that, if you dare.'

Vanishing into the heavy stones, and gone.

Bluepearl sighed, looked round until he found the bottle he was looking for. 'Hah, I knew we had one. Quorl Milk. Why should they get all the fun?'

The two men trundled just behind the woman, so eager they trod on her heels as they fought for some imagined dominant position. Faint had never seen anything so pathetic, and the way the witch played all innocent, even when she worked her two men just to keep trouble stirred up – all of it seemingly accidental, of course, but it wasn't accidental because Precious Thimble knew precisely what she was up to and as far as Faint was concerned that was cruel beyond all reason.

It didn't help, either, that the two men – evidently brothers – looked so much alike. With the same way of walking, the same facial expressions, the same tone of voice. If they were no different from each other, then why not just choose one and be done with it?

Well, she didn't expect any of them to last very long in any case. For most shareholders, the first trip was the deadliest one. It came with not knowing what to expect, with not reacting fast enough or just the right way. The first journey into the warrens killed over half first-timers.

Which meant that Precious Thimble (who struck Faint as a survivor) might well have her choice taken from her, when either Jula or Amby Bole went down somewhere on the trail.

As they rounded the corner and came within sight of the carriage, Faint saw that Glanno Tarp was already seated up top. Various rituals had been triggered to effect repairs to the huge conveyance; the horses looked restless and eager to be away – as mad as the rest of them, they were. Off to one side and now watching Faint, Quell and their new shareholders approaching, stood Reccanto Ilk and Sweetest Sufferance, and a third man – huge, round-shouldered, and tattooed in a pattern of—

'Uh oh,' said Master Quell.

*That's the one, isn't it? The caravan guard, the one who survived the Siege of Capustan. What was his name again?*

'This is not for you, Gruntle,' Master Quell said.

'Why not?'

'I've got some damned good reasons for saying no to you, and if you just give me a moment I'll come up with them.'

The man's feral smile revealed elongated canines.

'The Trell is inside,' Reccanto said. 'Want me to get him, Quell? We should get going, right?'

'Gruntle—'

'I'd like to sign on,' the caravan guard said, 'as a shareholder. Just like those recruits there behind you. Same stakes. Same rules.'

'When did you last take an order, Gruntle? You've been commanding guards for years now. You really think I want arguments with everything I say?'

'No arguments. I'm not interested in second-guessing you. As a shareholder, just another shareholder.'

The tavern door opened then and out walked Mappo Runt.

His glance slipped past Gruntle then swung back, eyes narrowing. Then he faced Master Quell. 'Is this one accompanying us? Good.'

'Well—'

The Trell moved up to the wagon and clambered up its side in a racket of squealing springs to take position behind Glanno Tarp. He looked back down. 'We'll probably need someone like him.'

'Like what?' asked the witch, Precious Thimble.

'Soletaken,' Mappo replied, shrugging.

'It's not quite like that,' Gruntle said quietly as he moved to join Mappo atop the carriage.

Master Quell stared after him, then, shaking himself, said, 'Everyone get aboard, then. You two Boles, you're facing astern. Witch, inside with me, where we can have ourselves a conversation. And you too, Mappo. We don't put passengers up top. Too risky.'

Faint swung herself up to sit beside Glanno Tarp.

Brakes were released. Glanno glanced back to scan the crowd clinging to various handholds on the roof behind him. Grinned, then snapped the reins.

The horses screamed, lunged.

The world exploded around them.

Blaze down, blessed sun, on this city of wonders where all is of consequence. Cast your fiery eye on the crowds, the multitudes moving to and fro on their ways of life. Flow warmth into the rising miasma of dreams, hopes, fears and loves that ever seethe skyward, rising in the breaths expelled, the sighs released, reflected from restive glances and sidelong regard, echoing eternal from voices in clamour.

See then this street where walks a man who had been young the last time he walked this street. He is young no longer, oh, no. And there in the next street, wandering a line of market stalls crowded with icons, figurines and fetishes from a thousand cults – most of them long extinct – walks a woman whose path had, years ago now, crossed that of the man. She too no longer feels young, and if desire possessed tendrils that could pass through stone and brick, that could wend through mobs of senseless people, why, might

they then meet in some fateful place and there intertwine, weaving something new and precious as a deadly flower? In another quarter of the city strides a foreigner, an impressive creature, tall and prominently muscled, very nearly sculpted, aye, with skin the perfect hue of polished onyx and eyes in which glitter flecks of hazel and gold, and many were the glances sliding over him as he passed. But he was not mindful of such things, for he was looking for a new life and might well find it here in this glorious, exotic city.

In a poor stretch of the Gadrobi District a withered, weathered woman, tall and thin, knelt in her narrow strip of garden and began placing flatstones into a pattern in the dark earth. So much of what the soil could give must first be prepared, and these ways were most arcane and mysterious, and she worked as if in a dream, while in the small house behind her still slept her husband, a knuckled monster filled with fear and hate, and his dreams were dark indeed for the sun could not reach the places in his soul.

A woman lounged on the deck of a moored ship in the harbour. Sensing fell kin somewhere in the city and, annoyed, giving much thought to what she would do about it. If anything, anything at all. Something was coming, however, and was she not cursed with curiosity?

An ironmonger held a conversation with his latest investor, who was none other than a noble Councillor and reputedly the finest duellist in all Darujhistan, and therein it was decided that young and most ambitious Gorlas Vidikas would take charge of the iron mines six leagues to the west of the city.

A rickety wagon rocked along the road well past Maiten yet still skirting the lake, and in its bed amidst filthy blankets was the small battered form of a child, still unconscious but judged, rightly so, that he would live. The poor thing.

This track, you see, led to but one place, one fate. The old shepherd had done well and had already buried his cache of coins beneath the stoop behind the shack where he lived with his sickly wife, who had been worn out by seven failed pregnancies, and if there was bitter spite in the eyes she

fixed upon the world is it any wonder? But he would do good by her in these last tired years, yes, he would, and he set to one side one copper coin that he would fling to the lake spirits at dusk – an ancient, black-stained coin bearing the head of a man the shepherd didn't recognize – not that he would, for that face belonged to the last Tyrant of Darujhistan.

The wagon rolled on, on its way to the mines.

Harllo, who so loved the sun, was destined to wake in darkness, and mayhap he was never again to see the day's blessed light.

Out on the lake the water glittered with golden tears.

As if the sun might relinquish its hard glare and, for just this one moment, weep for the fate of a child.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

When can he not stand alone
Where in darkness no shadows are cast
Whose most precious selves deny the throne
While nothing held in life will last a moment longer
Than what's carved into the very bones
But this is where you would stand
In his place and see all bleak and bridled
An array of weapons each one forged
For violence

When can he not stand alone
Where darkness bleeds into the abyss so vast
Whose every yearning seeks a new home
While each struggle leaves the meek to the stronger
And the fallen lie scattered like stones
But this is the life you would take in hand
To guide him 'cross the path so broken so riddled
Like the weapon of your will now charged
In cold balance

When can he not stand alone
Where in darkness every shadow is lost
Whose weary selves cut away and will roam
While nothing is left but this shielded stranger
Standing against the wind's eternal moans
But this is your hero who must stand
Guarding your broken desires the ragged flag unfurled
Rising above the bastion to see your spite purged
In his silence

*Anomandaris, Book III, verses 7–10*
Fisher kel Tath

The swath of ground where all the grasses had been worn away might have marked the passing of a herd of bhederin, if not for the impossibly wide ruts left behind by the enormous studded wheels of a wagon, and the rubbish and occasional withered corpse scattered to either side. Vultures and crows danced among the detritus.

Traveller sat slouched in the Seven Cities saddle atop the piebald gelding. Nearby, at the minimum distance that his horse would accept, was the witch, Samar Dev, perched like a child above the long-legged, gaunt and fierce Jhag horse whose name was, she had said, Havok. The beast's true owner was somewhere ahead, perhaps behind the Skathandi and the Captain's monstrous carriage, or beyond it. Either way, she was certain a clash was imminent.

'He dislikes slavers,' she had said earlier, as if this explained everything.

No demon, then, but a Toblakai of true blood, a detail that sent pangs of regret and pain through Traveller, for reasons he kept to himself – and though she had seen something of that anguish in his face it appeared she would respect his privacy. Or perhaps feared its surrender, for Samar Dev was a woman, he suspected, prone to plunging into vast depths of emotion.

She had, after all, travelled through warrens to find the trail of the one ahead of them on this plain, and such an undertaking was not embraced on a whim. *All to deliver a horse.* He knew enough to leave it at that, poor as it might be as justification for such extremity. The Kindaru had accepted the reason with sage nods, seeing nothing at all unusual in any of it – the horse was a sacred beast, after all, a Jhag, brother to their cherished horses-of-the-rock. They possessed legends with similar themes, and indeed they had spent half the night recounting many of them – and now they had found themselves a new one. Master of the Wolf-Horses met a woman so driven as to be his own reflection, and together they rode into the north, having drawn their threads through the last camp of the Kindaru, and were now entwined each with the other and both with the Kindaru, and though this was a tale not yet done it would nevertheless live on, for as long as lived the Kindaru themselves.

He had noted the grief in Samar Dev's weary, weathered face, as the many wounds delivered – in all innocence – by the Kindaru slowly sank deeper, piercing her heart, and now compassion swirled dark and raw in her eyes, although the Kindaru were far behind them now. It was clear, brutally so, that both she and Traveller had collected a new thread to twist into their lives.

'How far ahead?' she asked.

'Two days at the most.'

'Then he might have found them by now, or they him.'

'Yes, it's possible. If this Skathandi Captain has an army, well, even a Toblakai can die.'

'I know that,' she replied. Then added, 'Maybe.'

'And there are but two of us, Samar Dev.'

'If you'd rather cut away from this trail, Traveller, I will not question your decision. But I need to find him.'

He glanced away. 'His horse, yes.'

'And other things.'

Traveller considered for a time. He studied the broad, churned-up track. A thousand or five thousand; when people were moving in column it was always difficult to tell. The carriage itself would be a thing worth seeing, however, and the direction just happened to be the one he needed to take. The prospect of being forced into a detour was unacceptable. 'If your friend is smart, he won't do anything overt. He'll hide, as best one can on these plains, until he sees an advantage – though what that advantage might be, against so many, I can't imagine.'

'So you will stay with me for a while longer?'

He nodded.

'Then I should tell you some things, I think.'

They guided their horses on to the track and rode at the trot.

Traveller waited for her to continue.

The sun's heat reminded him of his homeland, the savannahs of Dal Hon, although in this landscape there were fewer flies and of the enormous herds of countless kinds of beasts – and the ones that hunted them – there was little sign. Here on the Lamatath there were bhederin, a lone species of antelope, hares, wolves, coyotes, bears and not much else. Plenty of hawks and falcon overhead, of course – but this place did not teem as one might expect and he wondered about that.

Had the conflagration at Morn wiped everything out? Left a blasted landscape slow to recover, into which only a few species drifted down from the north? Or were the K'Chain Che'Malle rabid hunters, indulging in a slaughterfest that did not end until they themselves were extinct? 'What do you know of the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths?'

He glanced across at her. 'Not much. Only that he cannot be killed.'

'Right.'

He waited.

Locusts crawled across the dusty track amidst shredded blades of grass, as if wondering who had beaten them to it. Somewhere high above a raptor loosed a piercing cry, the kind intended to panic a bird in flight.

'His sword was forged by the power of the Crippled God. Possessing levels of sorcery which the wielder can reach, each time, only by dying – fighting and dying with that weapon in his hands. The Emperor, a poor ravaged creature, a Tiste Edur, knew that death was but an illusion. He knew, I am certain of it, that he was cursed, so terribly cursed. That sword had driven him mad.'

Traveller imagined that such a weapon would indeed drive its wielder insane. He could feel sweat on the palms of his hands and shifted the reins into his right hand, settling the other on his thigh. His mouth felt unaccountably dry.

'He needed champions. Challengers. Sometimes they would kill him. Sometimes more than once. But as he came back again and again, ever stronger, in the end the challenger would fall. And so it went.'

'A terrible fate,' Traveller muttered.

'Until one day some ships arrived. On board, yet more champions from distant lands. Among them, Karsa Orlong, the Toblakai. I happened to be with him, then.'

'I would hear the story behind such a partnership.'

'Maybe later. There was someone else, another champion. His name was Icarium.'

Traveller slowly twisted in his saddle, studied the woman across from him. Some unconscious message told the gelding to halt.

Samar's Jhag horse continued on for a few steps, then she reined it in and turned to meet Traveller's eyes. 'I believe, if Icarium had met the Emperor, well, the dying would still be going on, spreading like a wildfire. An entire continent . . . pretty much incinerated. Who knows, perhaps the entire world.'

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

'Instead,' Samar Dev said, 'Karsa was sent for first.'

'What happened?'

Her smile was sad. 'They fought.'

'Samar Dev,' Traveller said, 'that makes no sense. The Toblakai still lives.'

'Karsa killed the Emperor. With finality.'

'How?'

'I have some suspicions. I believe that, somewhere, somehow, Karsa Orlong spoke with the Crippled God – not a pleasant conversation, I'm sure. Karsa rarely has those.'

'Then the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths—' 'Gone, delivered unto a final death. I like to believe Rhulad thanked Karsa with his last breath.'

If there was need for such a thought she was welcome to it. 'And the sword? Does the Toblakai now carry it as his own?'

She collected her reins and nudged her mount onward. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Another reason why I have to find him.'

*You are not alone in that, woman.* 'He bargained with the Crippled God. He *replaced* the Emperor.'

'Did he?'

He urged his horse forward, came up alongside her once more. 'What other possibility is there?'

And to that she grinned. 'Ah, but that is where I know something you don't, Traveller. I know Karsa Orlong.'

'What does that mean?'

'It's his favourite game, you see, pretending to be so . . . obvious. Blunt, lacking all subtlety, all decorum. Just a savage, after all. The only possibility is the obvious one, isn't it? That's why I don't believe that's what he's done.'

'You don't wish to believe, you mean. Now I will speak plain, Samar Dev. If your Toblakai wields the sword of the Crippled God, he shall have to either yield it or draw it against me. Such a weapon must be destroyed.'

'You set yourself as an enemy of the Crippled God? Well, you're hardly alone in that, are you?'

He frowned. 'I did not then,' he said, 'nor do I desire to do so now. But he goes too far.'

'Who are you, Traveller?'

'I played the game of civilization, once, Samar Dev. But in the end I remain as I am, a savage.'

'Too many have put themselves into Karsa Orlong's path,' she said. 'They do not stand there long.' A pause, and then, 'Civilized or barbarian – those are but words – the cruel killer can wear all the costumes he wants, can pretend to great causes and hard necessities. Gods below, it all sickens me, the way you fools carry on. Over the whole damned world it's ever the same.'

He answered this rant with silence, for he believed it *was* ever the same, and that it would never change. Animals remained just that, whether sentient or not, and they fought, they killed, they died. Life was suffered until it was over, and then . . . *then what?*

An end. It had to be that. It *must* be that.

Riding on, now, no words between them. Already past the telling of stories, the recounting of adventures. All that mattered, for each of them, was what lay ahead.

With the Toblakai named Karsa Orlong.

Some time in his past, the man known as the Captain had been a prisoner to someone. At some point he had outlived his usefulness and had been staked out on the plain, wooden spikes driven through his hands, his feet, hammered to the hard earth to feed the ants, to feed all the carrion hunters of Lamatath. But he'd not been ready to die just then. He had pulled his hands through the spikes, had worked his feet free, and had crawled on elbows and knees half a league, down into a valley where a once-mighty river had dwindled to a stream fringed by cottonwoods.

His hands were ruined. His feet could not bear his weight. And, he was convinced, the ants that had crawled into his ears had never left, trapped in the tunnels of his skull, making of his brain a veritable nest – he could taste their acidic exudations on his swollen, blackened tongue.

If the legend was true, and it was, hoary long-forgotten river spirits had squirmed up from the mud beneath the exposed bank's cracked skin, clawing like vermin to where he huddled fevered and shivering. To give life was no gift for such creatures; no, to give was in turn to take. As the king feeds his heir all he needs to survive, so the heir feeds the king with the

illusion of immortality. And the hand reaches between the bars of one cage, out to the hand reaching between the bars of the other cage. They exchange more than just touch.

The spirits fed him life. And he took them into his soul and gave them a new home. They proved, alas, restless, uncivil guests.

The journey and the transformation into a nomadic tyrant of the Lamatath Plains was long, difficult, and miraculous to any who could have seen the wretched, maimed creature the Captain had once been. Countless tales spun like dust-devils about him, many invented, some barely brushing the truth.

His ruined feet made walking an ordeal. His fingers had curled into hook-like things, the bones beneath calcifying into unsightly knobs and protrusions. To see his hands was to be reminded of the feet of vultures clutched in death.

He rode on a throne set on the forward-facing balcony of the carriage's second tier, protected from the midday sun by a faded red canvas awning. Before him walked somewhere between four hundred and five hundred slaves, yoked to the carriage, each one leaning forward as they strained to pull the enormous wheeled palace over the rough ground. An equal number rested in the wagons of the entourage, helping the cooks and the weavers and the carpenters until their turn came in the harnesses.

The Captain did not believe in stopping. No camps were established. Motion was everything. Motion was eternal. His two wings of cavalry, each a hundred knights strong, rode in flanking positions, caparisoned in full banded armour and ebony cloaks, helmed and carrying barbed lances, the heads glinting in the sunlight. Behind the palace was a mobile kraal of three hundred horses, his greatest pride, for the bloodlines were strong and much of his wealth (that which he did not attain through raiding) came from them. Horse-traders from far to the south sought him out on this wasteland, and paid solid gold for the robust destriers.

A third troop of horse warriors, lighter-armoured, ranged far and wide on all sides of his caravan, ensuring that no enemy threatened, and seeking out possible targets – this was the season, after all, and there were – rarely these

days, true enough – bands of savages eking out a meagre existence on the grasslands, including those who bred grotesque mockeries of horses, wide-rumped and bristle-maned, that if nothing else proved good eating. These ranging troops included raiding parties of thirty or more, and at any one time the Captain had four or five such groups out scouring the plains.

Merchants had begun hiring mercenary troops, setting out to hunt him down. But those he could not buy off he destroyed. His knights were terrible in battle.

The Captain's kingdom had been on the move for seven years now, rolling in a vast circle that encompassed most of the Lamatath. This territory he claimed as his own, and to this end he had recently dispatched emissaries to all the bordering cities – Darujhistan, Kurl and Saltoan to the north, New Callows to the southwest, Bastion and Sarn to the northeast – Elingarth to the south was in the midst of civil war, so he would wait that out.

In all, the Captain was pleased with his kingdom. His slaves were breeding, providing what would be the next generation to draw his palace. Hunting parties carried in bhederin and antelope to supplement the finer foodstuffs looted from passing caravans. The husbands and wives of his soldiers brought with them all the necessary skills to maintain his court and his people, and they too were thriving.

So like a river, meandering over the land, this kingdom of his. The ancient, half-mad spirits were most pleased.

Though he never much thought about it, the nature of his tyranny was, as far as he was concerned, relatively benign. Not with respect to foreigners, of course, but then who gave a damn for them? Not his blood, not his adopted kin, not his responsibility. And if they could not withstand his kingdom's appetites, then whose fault was that? Not his.

Creation demands destruction. Survival demands that something else fails to survive. No existence was truly benign.

Still, the Captain often dreamed of finding those who had nailed him to the ground all those years ago – his memories of that time were maddeningly vague. He could not make out their faces, or their garb. He

could not recall the details of their camp, and as for who and what he had been before that time, well, he had no memory at all. Reborn in a riverbed. He would, when drunk, laugh and proclaim that he was but eleven years old, eleven from that day of rebirth, that day of beginning anew.

He noted the lone rider coming in from the southwest, the man pushing his horse hard, and the Captain frowned – the fool had better have a good reason for abusing the beast in that manner. He didn't appreciate his soldiers posturing and seeking to make bold impressions. He decided that, if the reason was insufficient, he would have the man executed in the traditional manner – trampled into bloody ruin beneath the hoofs of his horses.

The rider drew up alongside the palace, a servant on the side platform taking the reins of the horse as the man stepped aboard. An exchange of words with the Master Sergeant, and then the man was climbing the steep steps to the ledge surrounding the balcony. Where, his head level with the Captain's knees, he bowed.

'Sire, Fourth Troop, adjudged ablest rider to deliver this message.'

'Go on,' said the Captain.

'Another raiding party was found, sire, all slain in the same manner as the first one. Near a Kindaru camp this time.'

'The Kindaru? They are useless. Against thirty of my soldiers? That cannot be.'

'Troop Leader Uludan agrees, sire. The proximity of the Kindaru was but coincidental – or it was the raiding party's plan to ambush them.'

Yes, that was likely. The damned Kindaru and their delicious horses were getting hard to find of late. 'Does Uludan now track the murderers?'

'Difficult, sire. They seem to possess impressive lore and are able to thoroughly hide their trail. It may be that they are aided by sorcery.'

'Your thought or Uludan's?'

A faint flush of the man's face. 'Mine, sire.'

'I did not invite your opinion, soldier.'

'No, sire. I apologize.'

Sorcery – the spirits within should have sensed such a thing anywhere on his territory. Which tribes were capable of assembling such skilled and no doubt numerous warriors? Well, one obvious answer was the Barghast – but they did not travel the Lamatath. They dwelt far to the north, along the edges of the Rhivi Plain, in fact, and north of Capustan. There should be no Barghast this far south. And if, somehow, there were . . . the Captain scowled. 'Twenty knights shall accompany you back to the place of slaughter. You will then lead them to Uludan's troop. Find the trail no matter what.'

'We shall, sire.'

'Be sure Uludan understands.'

'Yes, sire.'

And understand he would. The knights were there not just to provide a heavier adjunct to the troop. They were to exact whatever punishment the sergeant deemed necessary should Uludan fail.

The Captain had just lost sixty soldiers. Almost a fifth of his total number of light cavalry.

'Go now,' he said to the rider, 'and find Sergeant Teven and send him to me at once.'

'Yes, sire.'

As the man climbed back down, the Captain leaned back in his throne, staring down at the dusty backs of the yoked slaves. Kindaru there, yes. And Sinbarl and the last seven or so Gandaru, slope-browed cousins of the Kindaru soon to be entirely extinct. A shame, that – they were strong bastards, hard-working, never complaining. He'd set aside the two surviving women and they now rode a wagon, bellies swollen with child, eating fat grubs, the yolk of snake eggs and other bizarre foods the Gandaru were inclined towards. Were the children on the way pure Gandaru? He did not

think so – their women rutted anything with a third leg, and far less submissively than he thought prudent. Even so, one or both of those children might well be his.

Not as heirs, of course. His bastard children held no special rights. He did not even acknowledge them. No, he would adopt an heir when the time came – and, if the whispered promises of the spirits were true, that could be centuries away.

His mind had stepped off the path, he realized.

Sixty slain soldiers. Was the kingdom of Skathandi at war? Perhaps so.

Yet the enemy clearly did not dare face him here, with his knights and the entire mass of his army ready and able to take the field of battle. Thus, whatever army would fight him was small—

Shouts from ahead.

The Captain's eyes narrowed. From his raised vantage point he could see without obstruction that a lone figure was approaching from the northwest. A skin of white fur flapped in the breeze like the wing of a ghost-moth, spreading out from the broad shoulders. A longsword was strapped to the man's back, its edges oddly rippled, the blade itself a colour unlike any metal the Captain knew.

As the figure came closer, as if expecting the massed slaves to simply part before him, the Captain's sense of scale was jarred. The warrior was enormous, easily half again as tall as the tallest Skathandi – taller even than a Barghast. A face seemingly masked – no, tattooed, in a crazed broken glass or tattered web pattern. Beneath that barbaric visage, the torso was covered in some kind of shell armour, pretty but probably useless.

Well, the fool – huge or not – was about to be trampled or pushed aside. Motion was eternal. Motion was – a sudden spasm clutched at the Captain's mind, digging fingers into his brain – the spirits, thrashing in terror – shrieking—

A taste of acid on his tongue—

Gasping, the Captain gestured.

A servant, who sat behind him in an upright coffin-shaped box, watching through a slit in the wood, saw the signal and pulled hard on a braided rope. A horn blared, followed by three more.

And, for the first time in seven years, the kingdom of Skathandi ground to a halt.

The giant warrior strode for the head of the slave column. He drew his sword. As he swung down with that savage weapon, the slaves began screaming.

From both flanks, the ground shook as knights charged inward.

More frantic gestures from the Captain. Horns sounded again and the knights shifted en masse, swung out wide to avoid the giant.

The sword's downward stroke had struck the centre spar linking the yoke harnesses. Edge on blunt end, splitting the spar for half its twenty-man length. Bolts scattered, chains rushed through iron loops to coil and slither on to the ground.

The Captain was on his feet, tottering, gripping the bollards of the balcony rail. He could see, as his knights drew up into ranks once more, all heads turned towards him, watching, waiting for the command. But he could not move. Pain lanced up his legs from the misshapen bones of his feet. He held on to the ornate posts with his feeble hands. Ants swarmed in his skull.

The spirits were gone.

Fled.

He was alone. He was empty.

Reeling back, falling into his throne.

He saw one of his sergeants ride out, drawing closer to the giant, who now stood leaning on his sword. The screams of the slaves sank away and those suddenly free of their bindings staggered to either side, some falling

to their knees as if subjecting themselves before a new king, a usurper. The sergeant reined in and, eyes level with the giant's own, began speaking.

The Captain was too far away. He could not hear, and he needed to – sweat poured from him, soaking his fine silks. He shivered as fever rose through him. He looked down at his hands and saw blood welling from the old wounds – opened once more – and from his feet as well, pooling in the soft padded slippers. He remembered, suddenly, what it was like to think about dying, letting go, surrendering. There, yes, beneath the shade of the cottonwoods—

The sergeant collected his reins and rode at the canter for the palace.

He drew up, dismounted in a clatter of armour and reached up to remove his visored helm. Then he ascended the steps.

'Captain, sir. The fool claims that the slaves are now free.'

Staring into the soldier's blue eyes, the grizzled expression now widened by disbelief, by utter amazement, the Captain felt a pang of pity. 'He is the one, isn't he?'

'Sir?'

'The enemy. The slayer of my subjects. I feel it. The truth – I see it, I feel it. I taste it!' The sergeant said nothing.

'He wants my throne,' the Captain whispered, holding up his bleeding hands. 'Was that all this was for, do you think? All I've done, just for him?'

'Captain,' the sergeant said in a harsh growl. 'He has ensorcelled you. We will cut him down.'

'No. You do not understand. *They're gone!'*

'Sir—'

'Make camp, Sergeant. Tell him – tell him he is to be my guest at dinner. My guest. Tell him . . . tell him . . . my guest, yes, just that.'

The sergeant, a fine soldier indeed, saluted and set off.

Another gesture with one stained, dripping, mangled hand. Two maids crept out to help him to his feet. He looked down at one. A Kindaru, round and plump and snouted like a fox – he saw her eyes fix upon the bleeding appendage at the end of the arm she supported, and she licked her lips.

*I am dying.*

*Not centuries. Before this day is done. Before this day is done, I will be dead.* 'Make me presentable,' he gasped.

'There shall be no shame upon him, do you see? I want no pity. He is my heir. He has come. At last, he has come.'

The maids, both wide-eyed with fear now, helped him inside.

And still the ants swarmed.

The horses stood in a circle facing inward, tails flicking at flies, heads lowered as they cropped grass. The oxen stood nearby, still yoked, and watched them. Kedeviss, who leaned with crossed arms against one of the wagon's wheels, seemed to be watching the grey-haired foreigner with the same placid, empty regard.

Nimander knew just how deceptive that look could be. Of them all – these paltry few left – she saw the clearest, with acuity so sharp it intimidated almost everyone subject to it. The emptiness – if the one being watched finally turned to meet those eyes – would slowly fade, and something hard, unyielding and immune to obfuscation would slowly rise in its place. Unwavering, ever sharpening until it seemed to pierce the victim like nails being hammered into wood. And then she'd casually look away, unmindful of the thumping heart, the pale face and the beads of sweat on the brow, and the one so assailed was left with but two choices: to fear this woman, or to love her with such savage, demanding desire that it could crush the heart.

Nimander feared Kedeviss. And loved her as well. He was never good with choices.

If Kallor sensed that regard – and Nimander was certain he did – he was indifferent to it, preferring to divide his attention between the empty sky and the empty landscape surrounding them. When he wasn't sleeping or

eating. An unpleasant guest, peremptory and imperious. He would not cook, nor bother cleansing his plate afterwards. He was a man with six servants.

Nenanda was all for banishing the old man, driving him away with stones and pieces of dung, but Nimander found something incongruous in that image, as if it was such an absurd impossibility that it had no place even in his imagination.

'He's weakening,' Desra said at his side.

'We're soon there, I think,' Nimander replied. They were just south of Sarn, which had once been a sizeable city. The road leading to it had been settled all along its length, ribbon farms behind stalls, shops and taverns. The few residents left were an impoverished lot, skittish as whipped dogs, hacking at hard ground that had been fallow too long – at least until they saw the travellers on the main road, whereupon they dropped their hoes and hurried away.

The supplies left at the T-intersection had been meticulously packed into wooden crates, the entire pile covered in a tarp with its corners staked. Ripe fruits, candied sugarrocks dusted in salt, heavy loaves of dark bread, strips of dried eel, watered wine and three kinds of cheese – where all this had come from, given the wretched state of the farms they'd passed, was a mystery.

'He would kill us as soon as look at us,' Desra said, her eyes now on Kallor.

'Skintick agrees.'

'What manner of man is he?'

Nimander shrugged. 'An unhappy one. We should get going.'

'Wait,' said Desra. 'I think we should get Aranatha to look at Clip.'

'Aranatha?' He looked round, found the woman sitting, legs folded under her like a fawn's, plucking flowers from the sloped bank of the road. 'Why? What can she do?'

Desra shook her head, as if unable to give her reasons. Or unwilling.

Sighing, Nimander said, 'Go ahead, ask her, then.'

'It needs to come from you.'

*Why?* 'Very well.' He set out, a dozen strides taking him to where Aranatha sat. As his shadow slipped over her she glanced up and smiled.

Smiles so lacking in caution, in diffidence or wry reluctance, always struck him as a sign of madness. But the eyes above it, this time, were not at all vacuous. 'Do you feel me, Nimander?'

'I don't know what you mean by that, Aranatha. Desra would like you to examine Clip. I don't know why,' he added, 'since I don't recall you possessing any specific skills in healing.'

'Perhaps she wants company,' Aranatha said, rising gracefully to her feet.

And he was struck, as if slapped across the face, by her beauty. Standing now so close, her breath so warm and so strangely dark. *What is happening to me? Kedeviss and now Aranatha.*

'Are you all right, Nimander?'

'Yes.' *No.* 'I'm fine.' *What awakens in me? To deliver both anguish and exaltation?*

She placed a half-dozen white flowers in his hand, smiled again, then walked over to the wagon. A soft laugh from Skintick brought him round.

'There's more of that these days,' his cousin said, gazing after Aranatha. 'If we are to be an incongruous lot, and it seems we are, then it follows that we confound each other at every turn.'

'You are speaking nonsense, Skintick.'

'That is my task, isn't it? I have no sense of where it is we're heading – no, I don't mean Bastion, nor even the confrontation that I think is coming. I mean *us*, Nimander. Especially you. The less control you have, the greater your talent for leadership seems to become, the qualities demanded of such a person – like those flowers in your hand, petals unfolding.'

Nimander grimaced at this and scowled down at the blossoms. 'They'll be dead shortly.'

'So may we all,' Skintick responded. 'But . . . pretty while it lasts.'

Kallor joined them as they prepared to resume the journey. His weathered face was strangely colourless, as if drained of blood by the incessant wind. Or whatever memories haunted him. The flatness in his eyes suggested to Nimander that the man was without humour, that the notion was as alien to him as mending the rips in his own clothes. 'Are you all finally done with your rest?' Kallor asked, noting the flowers still in Nimander's hand with a faint sneer.

'The horses needed it,' Nimander said. 'Are you in a hurry? If so, you could always go ahead of us. When you stop for the night we'll either catch up with you or we won't.'

'Who would feed me, then?'

'You could always feed yourself,' Skintick said. 'Presumably you've had to do that on occasion.'

Kallor shrugged. 'I will ride the wagon,' he said, heading off.

Nenanda had collected the horses and now led them over. 'They all need re-shoeing,' he said, 'and this damned road isn't helping any.'

A sudden commotion at the wagon brought them all round, in time to see Kallor flung backward from the side rail, crashing heavily on the cobbles, the look on his face one of stunned surprise. Above him, standing on the bed, was Aranatha, and even at that distance they could see something dark and savage blazing from her eyes.

Desra stood near her, mouth hanging open.

On the road, lying on his back, Kallor began to laugh. A rasping, breathy kind of laugh.

With a bemused glance at Skintick and Nenanda, Nimander walked over.

Aranatha had turned away, resuming her ministrations to Clip, trickling water between the unconscious man's lips. Tucking the flowers under his belt, Nimander pulled himself on to the wagon and met Desra's eyes. 'What happened?'

'He helped himself to a handful,' Desra replied tonelessly, nodding towards Aranatha. 'She, er, pushed him away.'

'He was balanced on a wheel spoke?' Skintick asked from behind Nimander.

Desra shook her head. 'One hand on the rail. She just . . . *sent him flying.'*

The old man, his laughter fading away, was climbing to his feet. 'You damned Tiste Andii,' he said, 'no sense of adventure.'

But Nimander could see that, despite Kallor's seeming mirth, the grizzled warrior was somewhat shaken. Drawing a deep breath and wincing at some pain in his ribs, he moved round to the back of the wagon and once more climbed aboard, this time keeping his distance from Aranatha.

Nimander leaned on the rail, close to Aranatha. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

Glancing up, she gave him another one of those appallingly innocent smiles. 'Can you feel me now, Nimander?'

Was the *idea* of water enough to create an illusion so perfect that every sense was deceived? The serpent curl of the One River, known as Dorssan Ryl, encircled half the First City of Kharkanas. Before the coming of light there was no reflection from its midnight surface, and to settle one's hand in its ceaseless flow was to feel naught but a cooler breath against the skin as the current sighed round the intrusion. *'Water in Darkness, dreams in sleep'* – or so wrote one of the Mad Poets of the ninety-third century, during the stylistic trend in poetry characterized by brevity, a style that crashed in the following century during the period of art and oratory known as the Flowering Bright.

Water in perfect illusion . . . was this fundamentally no different from real water? If the senses provide all that defines the world, then were they not

the arbiters of reality? As a young acolyte, fired with passions of all sorts, Endest Silann had argued bell after bell with his fellow students over such matters. All those *'Essence of truth, senses will lie'* themes that seemed so important then, before every universe exploded in the conflagration of creation, shoving all those bright, flaring candles over the table edge, down into the swirling sea of wax where every notion, every idea, melted into one and none, into the scalding sludge that drowned everyone no matter how clever, how wise, how *poetic*.

*What am I thinking of these days? Naught but the nonsense of my wasted youth. 'Certainty scours, a world without wonder.' Ah, then, perhaps those terse poets had stumbled on to something after all. Is this what obsesses me now? A suspicion that all the truths that matter lie somewhere in a soul's youth, in those heady days when words and thoughts could still shine – as if born from nothing solely for our personal edification.*

*Generation upon generation, this does not change. Or so it comforts us to believe. Yet I wonder, now, does that stretch of delight grow shorter? Is it tightening, cursed into a new kind of brevity, the one with ignorance preceding and cynicism succeeding, each crowding the precious moment?*

*What then the next generation? Starved of wonder, indifferent to the reality or the unreality of the water flowing past, caring only whether they might drift or drown. And then, alas, losing the sense of difference between the two.*

There was no one, here in his modest chamber, to hear his thoughts. No one, indeed, who even cared. Deeds must tumble forward, lest all these witnesses grow bored and restless. And if secrets dwelt in the lightless swirl of some unseen, unimagined river, what matter when the effort to delve deep was simply too much? *No, better to . . . drift.* But worries over the mere score of young Tiste Andii growing now in Black Coral was wasted energy. He had no wisdom to offer, even if any of them was inclined to listen, which they weren't. The old possessed naught but the single virtue of surviving, and when nothing changed, it was indeed an empty virtue.

He remembered the great river, its profound mystery of existence. Dorssan Ryl, into which the sewers poured the gritty, rain-diluted blood of

the dead and dying. The river, proclaiming its reality in a roar as the rain lashed down in torrents, as clouds, groaning, fell like beasts on to their knees, only to fold into the now-raging currents and twist down into the black depths. All this, swallowed by an illusion.

There had been a woman, once, and yes, he might have loved her. Like the hand plunged into the cool water, he might have been brushed by this heady emotion, this blood-whispered obsession that poets died for and over which people murdered their dearest. And he recalled that the last time he set eyes upon her, down beside Dorssan Ryl, driven mad by Mother's abandonment (many were), there was nothing he recognized in her eyes. To see, there in a face he had known, had adored, that appalling absence – she was gone, never to return.

*So I held her head under, watched those staring, uncomprehending eyes grow ever wider, filling with blind panic – and there! At the last moment, did I not see – a sudden light, a sudden—*

Oh, this was a nightmare. He had done nothing, he had been too much the coward. And he had watched her leave, with all the others so struck by loss, as they set out on a hopeless pilgrimage, a fatal search to find Her once again. What a journey that must have been! Before the last crazed one fell for the final time, punctuating a trail of corpses leagues long. A crusade of the insane, wandering into the nowhere.

Kharkanas was virtually an empty city after they'd gone. Anomander Rake's first lordship over echoing chambers, empty houses. There would be many more.

A calm, then, drifting on like flotsam in the stream, not yet caught by the rushes, not yet so waterlogged that it vanished, tumbled like a severed moon into the muddy bed. Of course it couldn't last. One more betrayal was needed, to shatter the world once and for all.

The night just past Endest Silann, making his way to a back storeroom on the upper level, came upon the Son of Darkness in a corridor. Some human, thinking the deed one of honour, had hung a series of ancient Andii tapestries down both walls of the passage. Scenes of Kharkanas, and one

indeed showing Dorssan Ryl – although none would know if not familiar with that particular vantage point, for the river was but a dark slash, a talon curled round the city's heart. There was no particular order, arrayed so in ignorance, and to walk this corridor was to be struck by a collage of images, distinct as memories not one tethered to the next.

Anomander Rake had been standing before one, his eyes a deep shade of amber. Predatory, fixed as a lion's before a killing charge. On the faded tapestry a figure stood tall amidst carnage. The bodies tumbled before him all bled from wounds to the back. Nothing subtle here, the weaver's outrage dripped from every thread. White-skinned, onyx-eyed, sweat-blackened hair braided like hanging ropes. Slick swords in his hands, he looked out upon the viewer, defiant and cold. In the wracked sky behind him wheeled Locqui Wyval with women's heads, their mouths open in screams almost audible.

'He did not mean it,' said Anomander Rake.

*But he did.* 'Your ability to forgive far surpasses mine, Lord.'

'The body follows the head, but sometimes it's the other way round. There was a cabal. Ambitious, hungry. They used him, Endest, they used him badly.'

'They paid for it, didn't they?'

'We all did, old friend.'

Endest Silann looked away. 'I so dislike this hallway, Lord. When I must walk it, I look neither left nor right.'

Rake grunted. 'It is indeed a gauntlet of recrimination.'

'Reminders, Lord, of the fact that some things never change.'

'You must wrest yourself loose, Endest. This despondency can . . . ravage the soul.'

'I have heard, there is a river that empties into Coral Bay. Eryn or Maurik. Which seems depthless.'

Anomander Rake, still studying the tapestry, nodded.

'Spinnock Durav has seen it, walked its shores. He says it reminds him of Dorssan Ryl . . . his childhood.'

'Yes, there are some similarities.'

'I was thinking, if I could be spared . . .'

His Lord glanced over and smiled. 'A pilgrimage? Of course, Endest. If, that is, you can return before a month passes.'

*Ah, are we so close, then?* 'I will not stay long, Lord. Only to see, with my own eyes, that is all.'

The glance had become something more focused, and the amber glare had dimmed to something like . . . *like mud*. 'I fear you may be disappointed. It is but a deep river. We cannot touch the past, old friend.' He looked back once more on the tapestry. 'And the echoes we imagine we hear, well, they *deceive.* Do not be surprised, Endest, if you find nothing you seek, and everything you fear.'

*And what is it, Lord, that you think I seek? I would not ask what you think I fear for you know the answer to that one.* 'I thought the walk might do me some good.'

'And so it shall.'

Now, the next day, he sat in his chamber. A small leather pack of supplies rested beside the door. And the thought of a walk, a long one, up rugged mountainsides beneath hard sunlight, no longer seemed so appetizing. Age did such things, feeding the desire then starving the will. And what, after all, would seeing the river achieve?

A reminder of illusions, perhaps, a reminder that, in a realm for ever beyond reach, there stood the ruin of a once-great city, and, flowing round it, Dorssan Ryl, living on, ceaseless in its perfect absence, in playing its game of existence. A river of purest darkness, the life water of the Tiste Andii, and if the children were gone, well, what difference did that make?

Children will leave. Children will abandon the old ways, and the old fools with all their pointless advice can mutter and grumble to empty spaces and nod at the answering echoes. Stone and brickwork make ideal audiences.

No, he would make this journey. He would defy the follies of old age, unmeasured and unmocked under the eyes of the young. A solitary pilgrimage.

And all these thoughts, seeming so indulgent and wayward, will perhaps reveal their worth then, driving dire echoes forward to that future moment of revelation. Hah. Did he believe such things? Did he possess the necessary faith?

*'Ask no question, the river shall answer.'*

*'Question the river, find the answer.'*

The Mad Poets spent lifetimes waging profound wars in their rendered prose. Achieving what? Why, the implosive obliteration of their tradition.

Summarize that in two clauses.

'I need you to make a journey.'

Spinnock Durav managed a smile. 'When, Lord?'

Anomander Rake stretched out his legs until his boots were very nearly in the flames of the hearth. 'Soon, I think. Tell me, how goes the game?'

He squinted at the fire. 'Not well. Oh, I win each time. It's just that my finest opponent does poorly of late. His mind is on other matters, unfortunately. I am not pressed, and this removes much of the pleasure.'

'This would be Seerdomin.'

Spinnock glanced up, momentarily surprised. *But of course*, he told himself, *he is the Son of Darkness, after all. They may well call him the Ghost King, but I doubt there is a single detail he does not know in Black Coral. They will not heed that until they make a terrible mistake and then it will be too late.* 'Seerdomin, yes. The Benighted.'

A faint smile from Anomander Rake. 'Itkovian was a most extraordinary man. This newborn cult interests me, and I am not so sure it would have pleased him. He saw himself as a soldier, a failed one at that – the fall of Capustan devastated him.' He paused for a moment, clearly remembering, then he said, 'They were but a mercenary company, modest in complement – nothing like the Crimson Guard. I dare say even the Crimson Guard would have failed to hold Capustan.'

Spinnock Durav remained silent, attentive. He had been away during that time. Another journey on behalf of his Lord. *Hunting a dragon, of all things.* Conversations like the one he'd found at the end of that quest were not worth repeating.

'He could forgive everyone but himself.'

*No wonder you liked him.*

Anomander Rake sighed. 'I cannot say how long you will need, Spinnock. As long, perhaps, as you can manage.'

As the significance of that statement settled into Spinnock Durav he felt an uncharacteristic flash of dismay.

Angry at himself, he slowly settled his hands on the arms of the chair, fingers curling round the smooth wood, hoping he'd left nothing in his expression. *This is what I do and will do. Until my end. She is young, so young – oh, there's no point in thinking about . . . about any of that. About her at all.* Was he able to keep the anguish from his eyes? What thoughts – doubts – rustled through his Lord now as he watched his old friend? Feeling defeated, Spinnock Durav glanced over at Anomander Rake.

The ruler of Black Coral sat frowning at his smouldering boots.

*So, how long has he been thus?* 'I have always . . . managed, Lord.'

'Yes, you have. I am curious. What so afflicts Seerdomin?'

'A crisis of faith, I think.' *Life like Kef Tanar, this skipping across paths. He does it so well, this man whom I have never defeated in our tabletop wars, not in ten thousand years. But I can stay with you, Lord, at least this*

*far.* 'He has ceased making his daily pilgrimage. Among those living out there, there have grown . . . expectations. Which, it seems, he is unable to meet.'

'You tread carefully, Spinnock Durav. That is unlike you.'

'I do not possess all the details yet.'

'But you shall.'

'Eventually, yes.'

'And then?'

Spinnock looked across at Rake. 'I will do what needs doing.'

'Best hurry, then.'

*Ah, yes, I see now.*

'The Redeemer is a most helpless god,' Anomander Rake said after a time. 'Unable to refuse, unable to give. A sea sponge swallowing the entire sea. Then the next one and the one after that. Can it simply go on for ever? But for Itkovian, I would think not.'

'Is that a sort of faith, Lord?'

'Perhaps it is. Is his ability to forgive truly endless? To take on the pain and guilt of others for all eternity? I admit, I have some serious difficulties with this cult's root tenets – oh, as I said, I greatly admired Itkovian, the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords. I even understand, to some extent, his gesture with the Kron T'lan Imass. As the Redeemer, however . . . I cannot but wonder at a god so willing to assume the crimes and moral flaws of its followers, while in turn demanding nothing – no expectation of a change in behaviour, no threat of punishment should they continue to transgress. Absolution – yes, I grasp the notion, but absolution is not the same as redemption, is it? The former is passive. The latter demands an effort, one with implicit sacrifice and hardship, one demanding all the higher qualities of what we call virtues.'

'Yet he is called the Redeemer.'

'Because he takes on the task of redemption for all who come to him, all who pray to him. And yes, it is an act of profound courage. But he does not expect the same of his people – he appears to possess no expectations whatsoever.'

This was most loquacious of his Lord, evidence of a long, careful condensation of thought, of considerable energy devoted to the nature of the cult clinging to the very edge of Black Coral and Night, all of which seemed . . . unusual. 'He leads by example, then.'

A sudden glitter of interest in Anomander Rake's eyes and he studied Spinnock Durav intently. 'Has any one follower stumbled on to that possibility, Spinnock Durav?'

'I do not know. I, er, don't think so – but, Lord, I am too far outside all of it at the moment.'

'If the Redeemer cannot deny, then he is trapped in a state of imbalance. I wonder, what would be needed to redress that imbalance?'

Spinnock Durav found his mouth dry, and if he'd built proud castles of comprehension, if he'd raised sound fortifications to guard his assumptions, and arrayed vast armies to argue his case and to shift and align and manoeuvre to defend his cherished notions – if he had done all this to then sit in comfort, secure in his place in this conversation – if this was indeed a game of Kef Tanar, then in one simple question posed, his foe had crashed his empire to ruin.

*What would be needed to redress that imbalance?*

*A man who refuses.*

*You tell me time is short, my Lord. You lead me to elucidate what bothers me – for you can see that something does – and then, amidst the lofty clouds of religious discussion, you lash a lightning bolt down, striking my very heart.*

*If I am to do something, I must do it soon.*

*My Lord, my awe of you is unbounded. My love for you and the compassion you so delicately unveil leads me into this willingness, to storm without hesitation what you would have me storm, to stand for as long as needed, for it is what you need.*

'It is well I am immune to heat,' Anomander Rake said, 'for I have scorched my boots most severely.'

*And so the fire grows round you, yet you do not flinch.*

*I will not fail you, my Lord.*

'Endest Silann is upon the mountain road now,' Anomander Rake said, rising. 'And Crone has returned but soon must wing away again. I shall ask her to send a few grandchildren to guard him on his journey. Unless, of course, you think it might offend Endest Silann should he see them wheeling overhead?'

'It might, Lord, but that should not change your decision.'

A faint smile. 'Agreed. Send my regards to the priestess, Spinnock.'

Until that moment, he had not known he was going to visit the High Priestess – who had scoured away her very name in service to her role in the Temple of Darkness, to make of her ever-open legs an impersonal act, that made her body a vessel and nothing more – but he now knew that he needed to do just that. Kurald Galain was a most troubled warren right now. Storms rumbled within it, drumming every thread of power. Energies crackled. *Making her insatiable. So, she will want me – but that is not what concerns Anomander Rake. There is something else. I must go to her, and I don't even know why.*

*But he does.*

Spinnock Durav found himself sitting alone in the small chamber. The fire was down to coals. The air smelled of burned leather.

The High Priestess of the Temple of Dark had cut her hair even shorter, making her disturbingly boyish as she pushed him on to his back, straddling him with her usual eagerness. Normally, he would now begin to slow her

down, providing a force of resistance defying her impatience, and so drawing out her pleasure. This time, however, he let her have her way. This was all incidental. Since that unknown force had trembled through Kurald Galain, all the priestesses had been frantic in their desire, forcing male Tiste Andii into the temple and the rooms with the plush beds. If the rumours were true, then even the occasional human was dragged in for the same needful interrogation.

But no answers could be found in the indulgences of the flesh, and perhaps all this was a kind of metaphorical revelation of that raw truth, one that extended far beyond the temple and the prescriptions of priestesses. Yet, did he not want answers from Salind? From that young human woman who could not be more than twenty years of age? From another High Priestess?

He had seen too much, had lived too long. All she faced ahead and all the experiences still awaiting her – they belonged to her age, and should indeed be shared – if at all – by one of similar years. He had no desire to be a mentor, for the student soon grows past the need of one (if the mentor has done his job well), and then it is the mentor who rails against the notion of equality, or of being surpassed. But the impossibility of the notion went further. She would never surpass him. Instead, she would grow old all too quickly, and the sensibilities of her life, a life so truncated, could never match his.

Korlat had not hesitated with the Malazan sergeant Whiskeyjack – Spinnock had heard the tragic tale, bound up as it was in the conquest of Black Coral and the fall of the Pannion Domin. And the prolonged absence of both Korlat and her brother, Orfantal. Nevertheless, Whiskeyjack had been a man in his late forties – he had lived most of a life. And who could say if the union could have lasted? When, in a terribly short span of years, Korlat would have seen her beloved descend into decay, his back bent, hands atremble, memory failing.

Spinnock could almost imagine the end of that, as, broken-hearted, Korlat would face a moment with a knife in her hands, contemplating the mercy of

ending her husband's life. Was this a thing to look forward to? *Do we not possess enough burdens as it is?*

'If not for your desire I could feel in my nest,' said the woman now lying beneath him, 'I would think you disinterested, Spinnock Durav. You have not been with me here, it seems, and while it's said a man's sword never lies, now I truly wonder if that is so.'

Blinking, he looked down into her face. A most attractive face, one that both suited the nature of her devotion and yet seemed far too innocent – too open – for this life of uninhibited indulgence. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'I waited for you to . . . leave.'

She pushed out from under him, sat up and ran her long-fingered hands through the brush of her hair. 'We fail in that of late,' she said.

*Ah, so that is the reason for your desperation, your avidness.*

'It will return,' she said. 'It must. Something . . . changes, Spin.'

He stared at her unblemished back, the graceful curve of her spine, the slight rounding on her hips that he knew to be soft and cool to the touch. The angle of her shoulders bespoke either temporary satiation or a more prolonged weariness. 'Our Lord sends his regards.'

She turned to look down at him, brows lifted in surprise. 'He does? That would be a first.'

Spinnock frowned. *Yes, it would. I hadn't thought of that.* 'I will be leaving soon.'

Her eyes hardened. 'Why does he treat you so? As if he possessed you, to do with as he pleases.'

'I stand in his stead.'

'But you are not the Son of Darkness.'

'No, that is true.'

'One day you are going to die in his stead.'

'I am.'

'And then he will need to find another fool.'

'Yes.'

She glared down at him, then turned and swiftly rose. Black skin polished in the glow of the lanterns – nothing boy-like now, a figure all curves and softened planes. Spinnock smiled. 'I will miss you as well.'

Faint surrender as she sighed. And when she faced him again, there was nothing veiled in her eyes. 'We do what we can.'

'Yes.'

'No, you don't understand. The Temple – my priestesses. We try as Anomander Rake tries, both of us, seeking to hold on to some meaning, some purpose. He imagines it can be found in the struggles of lesser folk – of humans and all their miserable squabbles. He is wrong. We know this and so too does he. The Temple, Spin, chooses another way. The rebirth of our Gate, the return of Mother Dark, into our lives, our souls.'

'Yes. And?'

Something crumpled in her expression. 'We fail as he does. We know and he knows. The Son of Darkness does not send me his regards.'

*Then . . . he said 'priestess'. But he didn't mean this one.* Spinnock sat up, reached down to the floor where his clothes were lying. 'High Priestess,' he said, 'what can you tell me of the Cult of the Redeemer?'

'What?'

He looked up, wondered at the alarm in her eyes. After a moment he shook his head. 'No, I am not interested in forgiveness. Embracing the T'lan Imass killed the man – what would embracing us do to his soul?'

'I care not to think, Spin. Oh, he was glorious in his way – for all the blood that was needlessly spilled because of it – still . . . glorious. If you speak not of our burdens, then I do not understand your question.'

'It is newborn, this cult. What shape will it take?'

She sighed again – most extraordinary and further proof of her exhaustion. 'As you say, very young indeed. And like all religions, its shape – its future – will be found in what happens now, in these first moments. And that is a cause for concern, for although pilgrims gather and give gifts and pray, no organization exists. Nothing has been formulated – no doctrine – and all religions need such things.'

He rubbed at his jaw, considering, and then nodded.

'Why does this interest you?' she asked.

'I'm not sure, but I appreciate your expertise.' He paused, stared down at the clothes in his hands. He had forgotten something, something important – what might it be? 'I was not wrong,' she observed, still watching him. 'You are not yourself, Spin. Have you finally come to resent your Lord's demands?'

'No.' *Perhaps, but that is not worthy of consideration – the flaw would be mine, after all.* 'I am fine, High Priestess.'

She snorted. 'None of us are that, Spin,' she said as she turned away.

As his gaze dropped he saw his sword and belt lying on the floor. Of course – he had forgotten his ritual. He collected the weapon and, as the High Priestess threw on her robes, carried it over to the table and set it down. From the belt's stiff leather pouch he removed a small sponge, a metal flask of eel oil, and a much-stained pad of sharkskin.

'Ah,' said the High Priestess from the doorway, 'all is right with the world again. Later, Spin.'

'Yes, High Priestess,' he replied, electing to ignore her sarcasm. And the need it so poorly disguised.

Rain had rushed in from the sea, turning the paths into rivers of mud. Salind sat in the makeshift shed, legs curled up beneath her, shivering as water dripped down through holes in the roof. More people had come scratching at her door, but she had turned them all away.

She'd had enough of being a High Priestess. All her heightened sensitivities to the whims of the Redeemer were proving little more than a curse. What matter all these vague emotions she sensed from the god? She could do nothing for him.

This should not have surprised her, and she told herself that what she was feeling wasn't hurt, but something else, something more impersonal. Perhaps it was her grieving for the growing list of victims as Gradithan and his sadistic mob continued to terrorize the camp – so much so that some were planning to leave as soon as the road dried out. Or her failure with the Benighted. The expectations settling upon her, in the eyes of so many people, were too vast, too crushing. She could not hope to answer them all. And she was finding that, in truth, she could answer none of them.

Words were empty in the face of brutal will. They were helpless to defend whatever sanctity might be claimed, for a person's self, for their freedom to choose how they would live, and with whom. Empathy haunted her. Compassion opened wounds which only a hardening of the soul could in the future prevent, and this she did not want – she had seen too many faces, looked into too many eyes, and recoiled from their coldness, their delight in vicious judgement.

*The righteous will claim sole domain on judgement. The righteous are the first to make hands into fists, the first to shout down dissenters, the first to bully others into compliance.*

*I live in a village of the meek, and I am the meekest of them all. There is no glory in being helpless. Nor is there hope.*

Rain lashing down, a drumming roar on the slatted, angled roof, the sound of a deluge that filled her skull. *That the Redeemer will embrace is neither just nor unjust. No mortal can sanction their behaviour in the Redeemer's name. How dare they so presume?* Miserable faces marching past, peering in through the cracks in her door. And she wanted to rail at them all. *You damned fools. Absolution is not enough!* But they would then look upon her, moon-eyed and doleful, desperate that every question yield an answer, clinging to the notion that one suffered for a reason and knowledge of that reason would ease the suffering.

Knowledge, Salind told herself, eases nothing. It just fills spaces that might otherwise flood with despair.

*Can you live without answers? All of you, ask that of yourself. Can you live without answers? Because if you cannot, then most assuredly you will invent your own answers and they will comfort you. And all those who do not share your view will by their very existence strike fear and hatred into your heart. What god blesses this?*

'I am no High Priestess,' she croaked, as water trickled down her face.

Heavy boots splashing in the mud outside. The door was tugged back and a dark shape blotted out the pale grey light. 'Salind.'

She blinked, trying to discern who so spoke to her with such . . . such compassion. 'Ask me nothing,' she said. 'Tell me less.'

The figure moved, closing the door in a scrape of sodden grit that filled the shed with gloom once more. Pausing, standing, water dripping from a long leather cloak. 'This will not do.'

'Whoever you are,' Salind said, 'I did not invite you in.

This is my home.'

'My apologies, High Priestess.'

'You smell of sex.'

'Yes, I imagine so.'

'Do not touch me. I am poison.'

'I – I have no desire to . . . touch you, High Priestess. I have walked this village – the conditions are deplorable. The Son of Darkness, I well know, will not long abide such poverty.'

She squinted up at him. 'You are the Benighted's friend. The only Tiste Andii for whom humans are not beneath notice.'

'Is this what you believe of us, then? That is . . . unfortunate.'

'I am ill. Please go away, sir.'

'My name is Spinnock Durav. I might have told you that when last we met – I do not recall and clearly neither do you. You . . . challenged me, High Priestess.'

'No, I rejected you, Spinnock Durav.'

There might have been something like wry amusement in his tone as he replied, 'Perhaps the two are one and the same.'

She snorted. 'Oh, no, a perennial optimist.'

He reached down suddenly and his warm palm pressed against her forehead. She jerked back. Straightening, he said, 'You are fevered.'

'Just go.'

'I will, but I intend to take you with me—' 'And what of everyone else so afflicted in this camp? Will you carry them all out? Or just me, just the one upon whom you take pity? Unless it is not pity that drives you.'

'I will have healers attend the camp—'

'Do that, yes. I can wait with the others.'

'Salind—'

'That's not my name.'

'It isn't? But I was—'

'I simply chose it. I had no name. Not as a child, not until just a few months ago. I had no name at all, Spinnock Durav. Do you know why I haven't been raped yet? Most of the other women have. Most of the children, too. But not me. Am I so ugly? No, not in the flesh – even I know that. It's because I was a Child of the Dead Seed – do you know the meaning of that, Tiste Andii? My mother crawled half-mad on a battlefield, reaching beneath the jerkins of dead soldiers until she found a member solid and hard. Then she took it into herself and, if she were blessed, it would spill into her. A dead man's seed. I had plenty of brothers and sisters, a family of aunts and a mother who in the end rotted with some terrible

disease that ate her flesh – her brain was long gone by then. I have not been raped, because I am untouchable.'

He stared down at her, evidently shocked, horrified into dumb silence.

She coughed, wishing she did not get sick so often – but it had always been this way. 'You can go now, Spinnock Durav.'

'This place festers.' And he moved forward to pick her up.

She recoiled. 'You don't understand! I'm sick because *he's* sick!'

He halted and she finally could make out his eyes, forest green and tilted at the corners, and far too much compassion gleamed in that regard. 'The Redeemer? Yes, I imagine he is. Come,' and he took her up, effortlessly, and she should have struggled – should have been free to choose – but she was too weak. Pushing him away with her hands was a gesture, a desire, transformed into clutching helplessly at his cloak. Like a child.

*A child.*

'When the rains stop,' he murmured, his breath no doubt warm but scalding against her fevered cheek, 'we shall rebuild. Make all this new. Dry, warm.'

'Do not rape me.'

'No more talk of rape. Fever will awaken many terrors.

Rest now.'

*I will not judge. Not even this life of mine. I will not – there is weakness in the world. Of all sorts. All sorts . . .*

*

Stepping outside with the now unconscious woman in his arms, Spinnock Durav looked round. Figures on all sides, both hooded and bare-headed in the rain, water streaming down.

'She is sick,' he said to them. 'She needs healing.'

No one spoke in reply.

He hesitated, then said, 'The Son of Darkness will be informed of your . . . difficulties.'

They began turning away, melting into the grey sheets. In moments Spinnock found himself alone.

He set out for the city.

*The Son of Darkness will be informed . . . but he knows already, doesn't he? He knows, but leaves it all to . . . to whom? Me? Seerdomin? The Redeemer himself?*

*'Give my regards to the priestess.'*

*Her, then, this frail thing in my arms. I will attend to her, because within her lies the answer.*

*Gods, the answer to what?*

Boots uncertain in the slime and mud, he made his careful way back. Night awaited.

And, rising up from the depths of his memories, the fragment of some old poem, *'The moon does not rain, but it weeps.'* A fragment, yes, it must be that. Alas, he could not recall the rest and so he would have to settle with the phrase – although in truth it was anything but settling.

*I could ask Endest – ah, no, he is gone from us for the time being. The High Priestess, perhaps. She knows every Tiste Andii poem ever written, for the sole purpose of sneering at every one of them. Still.*

The words haunted him, mocked him with their ambiguity.

He preferred things simple and straightforward.

Solid like heroic sculpture – those marble and alabaster monuments to some great person who, if truth be known, was nowhere near as great as believed or proclaimed, and indeed looked nothing like the white polished face above the godlike body – *oh, Abyss take me, enough of this!*

*

In the camp, in the wake of the Tiste Andii's departure with the High Priestess half dead in his arms, the bald priest, short and bandy-legged and sodden under rain-soaked woollen robes, hobbled up to Gradithan. 'You saw?'

The ex-soldier grunted. 'I was tempted, you know. A sword point, right up back of his skull. Shit-spawned Tiste Andii bastard, what in Hood's name did he think, comin' here?'

The priest – a priest of some unknown god somewhere to the south, Bastion, perhaps – made tsk-tsking sounds, then said, 'The point is, Urdo—'

'Shut that mouth of yours! That rank ain't for nobody no more, you understand? Never mind the arsehole thinkin' he's the only one left, so's he can use it like it was his damned name or something. Never mind, cos he'll pay for that soon enough.'

'Humble apologies, sir. My point was, she's gone now.'

'What of it?'

'She was the Redeemer's eyes – his ears, his everything in the mortal world – and now that Tiste Andii's gone and taken her away. Meaning we can do, er, as we please.'

At that, Gradithan slowly smiled. Then said in a low, easy voice, 'What've we been doin' up to now, Monkrat?'

'While she was here, the chance remained of awakening the Benighted to his holy role. Now we need not worry about either of them.'

'I was never worried in the first place,' the once- Urdomen said in a half-snarl. 'Go crawl back into your hole, and take whoever with you as you fancy – like you say, nothing stopping us now.'

After the horrid creature scurried off, Gradithan gestured to one of his lieutenants. 'Follow that Andii pig back into Night,' he said. 'But keep your distance. Then get word to our friends in the city. It's all taken care of at the Barrow – that's the message you tell 'em, right? Go on and get back here before dawn and you can take your pick of the women – one you want to

keep for a while if you care to, or strangle beneath you for all I give a shit. Go!'

He stood in the rain, feeling satisfied. Everything was looking up, and up. And by squinting, why, he could almost make out that cursed tower with its disgusting dragon edifice – aye, soon it would all come down. Nice and bloody, like.

And though he was not aware of it – not enough to find cause for the sudden shiver that took him – he turned away from that unseeing regard, and so unknowingly broke contact with sleepy, cold, reptilian eyes that could see far indeed, through rain, through smoke, through – if so desired – stone walls.

Carved edifice Silanah was not. Sleepless, all-seeing protector and sentinel, beloved of the Son of Darkness, and possessed of absolute, obsidian-sharp judgement, most assuredly she was all that. And terrible in wrath? Few mortals could even conceive the truth and the capacity of the implacably just.

Which was probably just as well.

*'Mercy in compassion, no dragon lives.'*

When skill with a sword was but passing, something else was needed. Rage. The curse was that rage broke its vessel, sent fissures through the brittle clay, sought out every weakness in the temper, the mica grit that only revealed itself in the edges of the broken shards. No repairs were possible, no glue creeping out when the fragments were pressed back together, to be wiped smooth with a fingertip.

Nimander was thinking about pottery. Web-slung amphorae clanking from the sides of the wagon, the horrid nectar within – a species of rage, perhaps, little different from what had coursed through his veins when he fought. Rage in battle was said to be a gift of the gods – he had heard that belief uttered by that Malazan marine, Deadsmell, down in the hold of the Adjunct's flagship, during one of those many nights when the man had made his way down into the dark belly, jug of rum swinging by an ear in one hand.

At first Nimander had resented the company – as much as did his kin – but the Malazan had persisted, like a sapper undermining walls. The rum had trickled down throats, loosened the hinges of tongues, and after a time all those fortifications and bastions had stretched open their doorways and portals.

The rum had lit a fire in Nimander's brain, casting flickering red light on a host of memories gathered ghostly round the unwelcoming hearth. There had been a keep, somewhere, a place of childhood secure and protected by the one they all called *Father*. Ridged spines of snow lining the cobbled track leading to the embrasure gate, a wind howling down from grey mountains – a momentary abode where scores of children scurried about wild as rats, with the tall figure of Anomander Rake wandering the corridors in godlike indifference.

What had there been before that? Where were all the mothers? That memory was lost, entirely lost.

There had been a priest, an ancient companion of the Son of Darkness, whose task it had been to keep the brood fed, clothed, and healthy. He had looked upon them all with eyes filled with dismay, no doubt understanding – long before any of them did – the future that awaited them. Understanding well enough to withhold his warmth – oh, he had been like an ogre to them all, certainly, but one who, for all his bluster, would never, ever do them harm.

Knowing this, they had abused their freedom often. They had, more than once, mocked that poor old man. They had rolled beakers into his path when he walked past, squealing with delight when his feet sent them flying to bounce and shatter, or, better yet, when he lost his balance and thumped down on his backside, wincing in pain.

Such a cruel fire, lighting up all these ghastly recollections. Deadsmell, in his sleepy, seemingly careless way, had drawn out their tale. From that keep hidden in the fastness of some remote range of mountains to the sudden, startling arrival of a stranger – the aged, stooped Tiste Andii who was, it was learned with a shock, Anomander's very own brother. And the arguments echoing from their father's private chambers, as brothers fought

over unknown things – decisions past, decisions to come, the precise unfolding of crimes of the soul that led to harsh accusations and cold, cold silences.

Days later, peace was struck, somehow, in the dark of night. Their father came to them then, to tell them how Andarist was taking them all away. To an island, a place of warmth, of stretches of soft sand and pellucid waters, of trees crowded with fruit. And there, standing in the background during this imparting of a new future, was old Endest Silann, his face ravaged by some extremity of emotion – no more beakers underfoot, no more taunts and elusive imps racing to escape imagined pursuits (he never pursued, never once reached to snatch one of them, never raised a hand, never even raised his voice; he was nothing but a focus for their irreverence – an irreverence they would not dare turn upon their father). He had had his purpose and he had weathered it and now he wept as the children were drawn together and a warren was opened, a portalway into an unknown, mysterious new world where anything was possible.

Andarist led them through.

They would learn new things. The weapons awaiting them.

A stern teacher, not one to mock, oh no, that was quickly made clear when a casual cuff against the side of Skintick's head sent him flying – a cuff to answer some muttered derision, no doubt.

The games ended. The world turned suddenly serious.

They came to love that old man. Loved him far too much, as it turned out, for where Anomander might well have proved capable of pushing back the horrors of adulthood and its terrible world, Andarist was not.

Children made perfect soldiers, perfect killers. They had no sense of mortality. They did not fear death. They took bright pleasure in destruction, even when that destruction involved taking a life. They played with cruelty to watch the results. They understood the simplicity of power found there in the weapon held in the hand.

*See a bored child with a stick – and see how every beast nearby flees, understanding well what is now possible and, indeed, probable. See the child, eyes scanning the ground, swinging the stick down to crush insects, to thrash flowers, to wage a war of mayhem. Replace the stick with a sword. Explain how guilt need not be considered when the ones who must die are the enemy.*

*Unleash them, these children with the avid eyes.*

Good soldiers. Andarist had made them good soldiers. What child, after all, does not know rage?

But the vessel breaks.

The vessel breaks.

The Dying God, Nimander now believed, was a child.

The mad priests poured him full, knowing the vessel leaked, and then drank of that puerile seepage. Because he was a child, the Dying God's thirst and need were without end, never satiated.

As they journeyed along the road, ever westward, they found themselves between planted fields. Here the scarecrows were truly dead, used up. Withered, webbed in black scraps of cloth, stiffly rocking in the wind. Poured out, these lives, and Nimander now saw these fields as bizarre cemeteries, where some local aberration of belief insisted that the dead be staked upright, that they ever stand ready for whatever may come.

Watchers of this road and all the fools who travelled it.

Once, on Drift Avalii, almost a year before the first attacks, two half-dead Dal Honese had washed up on the rocky coast. They had been paddling to the island of Geni, for reasons unexplained, in an ancient dugout. Both were naked, as they had used up every scrap of cloth from their garments to stuff into the cracks in the hull – too many cracks, it turned out, and the beleaguered craft eventually sank, forcing the two men to swim.

The Lord's nudge brought them to Drift Avalii, and somehow they avoided the murderous reefs and rocks girdling the island.

Dwellers in the dark jungles of their homeland, they were from a tribe obsessed with its own ancestors. The dead were not buried. The dead were made part of the mud walls of the village's huts. When one in a family died, a new room would be begun, at first nothing but a single wall projecting outward. And in that wall was the corpse, clay-filled eye sockets, nose, ears, mouth. Clay like a new skin upon face, limbs, torso. Upright, in cavorting poses as if frozen in a dance. Two more kin needed to die before the room was complete and ready to be roofed with palm fronds and the like.

Some houses were big as castles, sprawled out at ground level in a maze of chambers, hundreds of them dark and airless. In this way, the dead never left. They remained, witnessing all, eternal in judgement – this pressure, said the two refugees, could drive one insane, and often did.

The jungle resisted farming. Its soil disliked taming. The huge trees were impervious to fire and could turn the edge of an iron axe. Villages were growing too massive, devouring land, while every cleared area around them was exhausted. Rival tribes suffered the same, and before too long wars were unleashed. The dead ancestors demanded vengeance for transgressions. Murdered kin – whose bodies had been stolen and so could not be properly taken care of – represented an open wound, a crime that needed answering.

Blood back and forth, said the two refugees. *Blood back and forth, that is all. And when the enemy began destroying villages, burning them to the ground . . .*

No answer to the madness but flight.

Nimander thought about all this as he led his mare by the reins along the dusty road. He had no ancestors to haunt him, no ancestors to demand that he do this and that, that he behave in this way but not in that way. Perhaps this was freedom, but it left him feeling strangely . . . lost.

The two Dal Honese had built a new boat and paddled away – not back home, but to some unknown place, a place devoid of unblinking ghosts staring out from every wall.

Rocking sounds came from the wagon and he turned to see Kallor swinging down on the near side, pausing to adjust his cloak of chain, then walking until he was alongside Nimander.

'Interesting use of corpses,' he said.

'What use would that be?' Skintick asked with a glance back towards them.

'To frighten the crows? Not that any right-minded crow would look twice at those foul plants – they're not even native to this world, after all.'

Nimander saw Skintick's brows rise. 'They aren't?'

Kallor scratched at his beard and, since it seemed he wasn't in any hurry to reply, Skintick faced forward once more.

'Saemankelyk,' said Nimander. 'The Dying God . . . who will be found in Bastion.'

The grey-haired warrior grunted. 'Nothing changes.'

'Of course it changes,' Skintick retorted without turning round. 'It keeps getting worse.'

'That is an illusion,' Kallor replied. 'You Tiste Andii should know that. Your sense of things getting worse comes from growing older. You see more, and what you see wars with your memories of how things used to be.'

'Rubbish. Old farts like you say that because it suits you. You hope it freezes us in our tracks so we end up doing nothing, which means your precious status quo persists just that much longer – enough for you to live out your life in whatever comfort you think you've earned. You won't accept culpability for anything, so you tell us that nothing ever changes.'

'Ah, the fire of youth. Perhaps one day, pup, you'll be old – assuming your stupidity doesn't get you killed first – and I'll find you, somewhere. You'll be sitting on the stone steps of some abandoned temple or, worse, some dead king's glorious monument. Watching the young people rush by. And I'll settle down beside you and ask you: "What's changed, old man?" And

you will squint, chew your gums for a time, then spit on to the cobbles shaking your head.'

'Plan on living for ever, Kallor?'

'Yes, I do.'

'What if your stupidity gets you killed?'

Kallor's grin was feral. 'It hasn't yet.'

Skintick glanced back again, eyes bright, and all at once he laughed. 'I am changing my mind about you.'

'The Dying God has stolen Clip's soul,' Nimander said. 'We're going to get it back.'

'Good luck.'

'I suppose we will need it.'

'I'm not the kind who helps, Nimander,' Kallor said. 'Even kin of Rake. Maybe,' he added, 'especially kin of Rake.'

'What makes you think—'

The man interrupted with a snort. 'I see him in all of you – excepting the empty one you call Clip. You are heading to Coral. Or you were, before this detour was forced upon you. Tell me, what do you imagine will happen when you find your glorious patron? Will he reach out one perfect hand to brush your brows, to bless the gift of your existence? Will you thank him for the privilege of being alive?'

'What do you know about it?' Nimander demanded, feeling the heat rise to flush his face.

'Anomander Rake is a genius at beginning things. It's finishing them he has trouble with.'

*Ah, that stings of truth. Kallor, you have just prodded my own soul. A trait I inherited from him, then? That makes too much sense.* 'So, when I speak to him of you, Kallor, he will know your name?'

'Were we acquaintances? Yes, we were. Did we delight in each other's company? You will have to ask him that one. Caladan Brood was simpler, easier to manage. Nothing but earth and stone. As for K'azz, well, I'll know more when I finally meet the bastard.'

'I do not know those names,' Nimander said. 'Caladan Brood. K'azz.'

'It's of no real significance. We were allies in a war or three, that is all. And perhaps one day we will be allies once more, who can say? When some vast enemy forces us once again into the same camp, all on the same side.' He seemed to think about that for a moment, then said, 'Nothing changes.'

'Are you then returning to Coral – where waits our father?'

'No. The dust I kicked up last time will need a few centuries to settle, I expect.' He was about to add something more when his attention was pulled away, and he stepped across Nimander's path – forcing him to halt – to walk to the road's edge, facing north.

'I'd spotted that,' Skintick muttered, also stopping.

Fifty or so paces from the road, just beyond a strip of the alien plants and its row of wrapped effigies, was a ruin. Only one of the walls of the squarish, tower-like structure rose above man-height. The stones were enormous, fitted without mortar. Trees of a species Nimander had never seen before had rooted on top of the walls, snaking long, thick ropes down to the ground. The branches were skeletal, reaching horizontally out to the sides, clutching mere handfuls of dark, leathery leaves.

Nenanda had stopped the wagon and all were now studying the ruin that had so captured Kallor's attention.

'Looks old,' Skintick said, catching Nimander's eye and winking.

'Jaghut,' Kallor said. And he set out towards it. Nimander and Skintick followed.

In the field, the furrows of earth were bleached, dead, and so too the ghastly plants. Even the terrible clouds of insects had vanished.

Kallor stepped between two corpses, but there was not enough room so he reached out to either side and pushed the stakes over. Dust spat from the bases as the scarecrows sagged, then, pulling free, fell to the ground. The warrior continued on.

'We can hope,' said Skintick under his breath as he and Nimander followed through the gap.

'For what?' Nimander asked.

'That he decides he doesn't like this Dying God. And makes up his mind to do something about it.'

'You believe he is that formidable?'

Skintick shot him a glance. 'When he said he was allied with Anomander and those others, it didn't sound as though he meant he was a soldier or minor officer in some army, did it?'

Nimander frowned, then shook his head.

Skintick hissed wordlessly through his teeth, and then said, 'Like . . . equals.'

'Yes, like that. But it doesn't matter, Skin – he won't help us.'

'I wasn't hoping for that. More like him deciding to do something for his own reasons, but something that ends up solving our problem.'

'I'd wager no coins on that, Skin.'

Drawing closer to the ruin, they fell silent. Decrepit as it was, the tower was imposing. The air around it seemed grainy, somehow brittle, ominously cold despite the sun's fierce heat.

The highest of the walls revealed a section of ceiling just below the uppermost set of stones, projecting without any other obvious support to cast a deep shadow upon the ground floor beneath it. The facing wall reached only high enough to encompass a narrow, steeply arched doorway. Just outside this entrance and to one side was a belly-shaped pot in which grew a few straggly plants with drooping flowers, so incongruous amid the

air of abandonment that Nimander simply stared down at them, disbelieving.

Kallor walked up to the entrance, drew off a scaled gauntlet and rapped it against the root-tracked frame. 'Will you greet us?' he demanded in a loud voice.

From within a faint shuffling sound, and then a thin, rasping reply: 'Must I?'

'The ice is long gone, Jaghut. The plains beyond are dry and empty. Even the dust of the T'lan Imass has blown away. Would you know something of the world you have ignored for so long?'

'Why? Nothing changes.'

Kallor turned a pleased smirk upon Nimander and Skintick and then faced the dark doorway once more. 'Will you invite us in, Jaghut? I am the High —'

'I know who you are, O Lord of Futility. King of Ashes. Ruler of Dead Lands. Born to glory and cursed to destroy it every time. Killer of Dreams. Despoiler of—' 'All right, enough of all that. I'm not the one living in ruins.'

'No, but you ever leave them in your wake, Kallor. Come in, then, you and your two Others. I greet you as guests and so will not crush the life from you and devour your souls with peals of laughter. No, instead, I will make some tea.'

Nimander and Skintick followed Kallor into the darkness within.

The air of the two-walled chamber was frigid, the stones sheathed in amber-streaked hoarfrost. Where the other two walls should have been rose black, glimmering barriers of some unknown substance, and to look upon them too long was to feel vertiginous – Nimander almost pitched forward, drawn up only by Skintick's sudden grip, and his friend whispered, 'Never mind the ice, cousin.'

Ice, yes, it was just that. Astonishingly transparent ice—

A figure crouched at a small hearth, long-fingered hands working a blackened kettle on to an iron hook above the coals. 'I ate the last batch of cookies, I'm afraid.' The words drifted out inflectionless from beneath a broad-brimmed black felt hat. 'Most people pass by, when they pass by. Seeing nothing of interest. None draw close to admire my garden.'

'Your garden?' Skintick asked.

'Yes. Small, I know. Modest.'

'The pot with the two flowers.'

'Just so. Manageable – anything larger and the weeding would drive me mad, you see.'

'Taking up all your time,' Kallor commented, looking round.

'Just so.'

A long stone altar provided the Jaghut with his bed, on which pale furs were neatly folded. A desk sat nearby, the wood stained black, the chair before it high-backed and padded in deerskin. On a niche set in the highest wall squatted a three-legged silver candlestick, oxidized black. Beeswax candles flickered in guttered pools. Leaning near the altar was an enormous scabbarded greatsword, the cross-hilt as long as a child's arm. Cobwebs coated the weapon.

'You know my name,' Kallor said. 'But I have not yet heard yours.'

'That is true.'

Something dangerous edged into Kallor's voice as he said, 'I would know the name of my host.'

'Once, long ago, a wolf god came before me. Tell me, Kallor, do you understand the nature of beast gods? Of course not. You are only a beast in the unfairly pejorative sense – unfair to beasts, that is. How is it, then, that the most ancient gods of this world were, one and all, beasts?'

'The question does not interest me, Jaghut.'

'What of the answer?'

'You possess one?'

The hands reached out and lifted the kettle from the hook as steam rushed up round the long fingers. 'This must now steep for a time. Am I unusual in my penchant for evading such direct questions? A trait exclusive to Jaghut? Hardly. Knowledge may be free; my voice is not. I am a miser, alas, although I was not always this way.'

'Since I see little value in this particular matter,' said Kallor, 'I would not bargain with you.'

'Ah, and what of the Others with you? Might not they be interested?'

Clearing his throat, Skintick said, 'Venerable one, we possess nothing of worth to one such as you.'

'You are too modest, Tiste Andii.'

'I am?'

'Each creature is born from one not its kind. This is a wonder, a miracle forged in the fires of chaos, for chaos indeed whispers in our blood, no matter its particular hue. If I but scrape your skin, so lightly as to leave but a momentary streak, that which I take from you beneath my nail contains every truth of you, your life, even your death, assuming violence does not claim you. A code, if you will, seemingly precise and so very ordered. Yet chaos churns. For all your similarities to your father, neither you nor the one named Nimander – nor any of your brothers and sisters – is identical to Anomander Dragnipurake. Do you refute this?'

'Of course not—'

'For each kind of beast there is a first such beast, more different from its parents than the rest of its kin, from which a new breed in due course emerges. Is this firstborn then a god?'

'You spoke of a wolf god,' Skintick said. 'You began to tell us a story.'

'So I did. But you must be made to understand. It is a question of essences. To see a wolf and know it as pure, one must possess an image in oneself of a pure wolf, a perfect wolf.'

'Ridiculous,' Kallor grunted. 'See a strange beast and someone tells you it is a wolf – and from this one memory, and perhaps a few more to follow, you have fashioned your image of a wolf. In my empires, philosophers spewed such rubbish for centuries, until, of course, I grew tired of them and had them tortured and executed.'

A strange muffled noise came from the hunched-over Jaghut. Nimander saw the shoulders shaking and realized the ancient was laughing.

'I have killed a few Jaghut,' Kallor said; not a boast, simply a statement. A warning.

'The tea is ready,' the Jaghut said, pouring dark liquid into four clay cups that Nimander had not noticed before. 'You might wonder what I was doing when the wolf god found me. I was fleeing. In disguise. We had gathered to imprison a tyrant, until our allies turned upon us and resumed the slaughter. I believe I may be cursed ever to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'T'lan Imass allies,' Kallor said. 'Too bad they never found you.'

'Kron, the clan of Bek'athana Ilk who dwelt in the Cliffs Above the Angry Sea. Forty-three hunters and a Bonecaster. They found me.'

Skintick squatted to pick up two of the cups, straightening to hand one to Nimander. The steam rising from the tea was heady, hinting of mint and cloves and something else. The taste numbed his tongue.

'Where is mine?' Kallor demanded. 'If I must listen to this creature I will drink his tea.'

Smiling, Skintick pointed down to where the cups waited on the ground.

Another soft laugh from the Jaghut. 'Raest was the name of the Tyrant we defeated. One of my more obnoxiously arrogant offspring. I did not mourn his fall. In any case, unlike Raest, I was never the strutting kind. It is a sign of weakness to shine blinding bright with one's own power. Pathetic diffidence. A need that undermines. I was more . . . secure.'

He had Kallor's attention now. 'You killed forty-three T'lan Imass and a Bonecaster?'

'I killed them all.' The Jaghut sipped from his own cup.

'I have killed a few T'lan Imass,' he said, the intonation a perfect mimicry of Kallor's own claim a few moments past. 'Tell me, then, do you like my abode? My garden?'

'Solitude has driven you mad,' Kallor said.

'You would know all about that now, wouldn't you, O Lord of Failures? Partake of the tea, lest I take offence.'

Teeth bared, Kallor bent down to retrieve his cup.

The Jaghut's left hand shot out, closing about Kallor's wrist. 'You wounded that wolf god,' he said.

Nimander stared as he saw the old man struggle to twist free of that grip. Veins standing out on his temple, jaw muscles bunching beneath the beard. But there was no pulling loose. There was no movement at all from that withered, green hand.

'When you laid waste to your realm,' the Jaghut continued. 'You wounded it terribly.'

'Release me,' Kallor said in a rasp. And with his other hand he reached back for the grip of his sword.

All at once the Jaghut's hand fell away.

Kallor staggered back and Nimander saw a white impression of fingers encircling the old warrior's wrist. 'This is not how a host behaves. You force me to kill you.'

'Oh, be quiet, Kallor. This tower was an Azath once. Shall I awaken it for you?'

Wondering, Nimander watched as Kallor backed towards the entrance, eyes wide in that weathered, pallid face, the look of raw recognition dawning. 'Gothos, what are you doing here?'

'Where else should I be? Now remain outside – these two Tiste Andii must go away for a while.'

Heat was spreading fast, out from Nimander's stomach. He cast a wild look at Skintick, saw his friend sinking slowly to his knees. The empty cup in his hand fell away, rolled briefly on the damp ground. Nimander stared at the Jaghut. 'What have you done?'

'Only what was necessary.'

With a snarl Kallor spun round and stalked from the chamber. Over his shoulder he said, 'I will not wait long.'

Nimander's eyes were drawn once more to the walls of ice. Black depths, shapes moving within. He staggered, reached out his hands—

'Oh, don't step in there—' And then he was falling forward, his hands passing into the wall before him, no resistance at all.

'Nimander, do not—'

Blackness.

Desra wandered round the wagon, drawing up to halt beside the ox. She set a hand on its back, felt the beast's heat, the rippling with every twitch shedding the biting flies. She looked down into the animal's eye, saw with a start how delicate its lashes. *'You must take the world as it is.'* Andarist's last words to her, before the world took him.

It wasn't hard. People either had strength or they didn't. The weak ones left her disgusted, welling with dark contempt. If they chose at all it was ever the wrong choice. They let the world break them time and again, then wondered – dull-eyed as this ox – why it was so cruel. But it wasn't the world that was the problem, was it? It was stepping into the stampede's path over and over again. It was learning nothing from anything. *Nothing.*

There were more weak people than strong ones. The weak were legion. Some just weren't smart enough to cope with anything beyond meeting immediate needs: the field to sow, the harvest to bring on to the threshing floor, the beasts of burden to feed. The child to raise, the coin for the next jug of ale, the next knuckle bag of d'bayang. They didn't see beyond the horizon. They didn't even see the next valley over. The world outside was where things came from, things that caused trouble, that jarred the proper

order of life. They weren't interested in thinking. Depths were frightening, long roads a journey without purpose where one could end up lost, curling up to die in the ditch.

She had seen so many of the weak ones. They died unjustly in their thousands. Tens of thousands. They died because they worshipped ignorance and believed this blind god could make them safe.

Among the strong, only a few were worth paying attention to. Most were bullies. Their threats were physical or they were emotional, but the effect was the same – to make the victim feel weak. And it was the self-appointed task of these bullies to convince as many people as possible that they were inherently weak, and their lives ones of pathetic misery. Once this was done, the bully would then say: *do as I say and I will keep you safe. I will be your strength . . . unless you anger me. If you anger me I will terrorize you. I might even kill you.* There were plenty of these bastards, pig-eyed and blustery little boys in big bodies. Or fish-eyed nasty bitches – although these ones, after proving to their victims how weak they were, would then lap up all the spilled blood. Delicate tongues flicking in and out. You had the physical bullies and the emotional bullies, and they both revelled in destroying lives.

No, she had no time for them. But there were others whose strength was of a much rarer kind. Not easy to find, because they revealed nothing. They were quiet. They often believed themselves to be much weaker than they were. But when pushed too hard, they surprised themselves, finding that they would not back away another step, that a wall had risen in their souls, unyielding, a barrier that could not be passed. To find one such as this was the most precious of discoveries.

Desra had played the bully more than once, as much from boredom as from anything else. She'd lapped up her share of blood.

She might well do the same with this one named Clip – if he ever returned to them, and there was no guarantee of that. Yes, she would use him and people like him, who imagined themselves strong but were, in truth, weak – or so she would prove, eventually. Certainly, their blood didn't taste any purer, any sweeter.

She had made her discovery, after all, of one whose strength was absolute. Before whom she herself felt weak but in a most pleasant, most satisfying way – one to whom she might surrender whatever she chose without fearing he would one day use it against her. Not this one.

Not Nimander Golit.

Desra saw Kallor emerge from the ruin, his agitation plain to see. Armour rustling, he marched between the scarecrows and up on to the road. Reaching the wagon, he pulled himself up with a worn boot on a wooden spoke, then paused to stare down at Clip. 'You should throw this fool away,' he said to Aranatha, who sat holding a thin cloth stretched out over the unconscious figure.

She smiled in answer and said nothing.

Desra frowned at Kallor. 'Where are the others?'

'Yes,' he replied with a sneer, 'the *others.'*

'Well?'

He lifted himself over the slats. 'The Jaghut decided to use them – unfortunately for them.'

*Use?* Nenanda swung round from where he sat on the bench. 'What Jaghut?' he demanded.

But Desra was already turning away, rushing down through the ditch and on to the withered field. Between the toppled scarecrows—

*So who is this Dying God?*

Skintick, who knew himself well, who knew that his imagination was the deadliest weapon he used against himself, who knew how, in any situation, he might laugh – a plunge into the depths of absurdity, a desperate attempt to save his sanity – now found himself awakening on a dusty platform, no more than twelve paces across, of limestone. It was surrounded by olive trees, a grove of ancient twisted boles and dark leathery leaves, the fruit clustered in abundance. A warm wind slid over his naked form, making the

sun's heat – at least to begin with – less oppressive than it should have been. The air smelled of salt.

The stumps of columns encircled the platform. They had been painted the deep hue of wine, but that had begun to flake away, exposing raw yellow rock.

*Who is this Dying God?*

His head aching, Skintick slowly sat up, shielding his eyes from the glare, but the sun's light rebounded from the stone and there was no relief. Groaning, he pushed himself to his feet, stood tottering. Gods, the pain in his head! Pulsing, exploding in blinding flashes behind his eyes.

*Who is this Dying—* There were corpses huddled beneath the trees – mostly bones and rotted cloth, tufts of hair, skin-stretched skulls. Once brightly coloured clothes, strange shoes, the glitter of buttons and jewellery, gold on bared teeth.

The sun felt . . . *evil*. As if its heat, its light, was somehow killing him, lancing through his flesh, tearing through his brain. He was growing ever sicker.

There was, he suddenly understood, no one left alive on this world. Even the trees were dying. The oceans were burning away and death was everywhere. It could not be escaped. The sun had become a murderer.

*Who is this—*

You could dream of the future. You could see it as but a recognizable continuation of what can be seen around you at this moment. See it as progress, a driven force with blinding glory at the very end. Or each moment as the pinnacle, at least until the next higher peak resolved itself. A farmer sows to feed the vision of fruition, of abundance, and the comfort that comes with a predictable universe reduced to this upcoming season. Drip libations to remind the gods that order exists.

You could dream of, at least, a place for your son, your daughter. Who would wish to deliver a child into a world of mayhem, of inescapable annihilation? And did it matter if death arrived as a force beyond the control

of anyone, or as the logical consequence of wilful stupidity? No it did not, when there was no one left to ponder such questions.

Fury and folly. Someone here had played the ultimate practical joke. Seeded a world with life, witnessed its burgeoning, and then nudged the sun to anger. Into a deadly storm, a momentary cough of poison light, and the season of life ended. Just so.

*Who is—*

The god dies when the last believer dies. Rising up bloated and white, sinking down into unseen depths. Crumbling into dust. Expelled in a gust of hot wind.

Venomous spears lanced through Skintick's brain, shearing through every last tether that remained. And suddenly he was free, launching skyward. Free, yes, because nothing mattered any more. The hoarders of wealth, the slayers of children, the rapists of the innocent, all gone. The decriers of injustice, the addicts of victimization, the endlessly offended, gone.

Nothing was fair. *Nothing. And that is why you are dying, dear god. That is why. How can you do anything else? The sun rages!*

*Meaningless!*

*We all die. Meaningless!*

*Who—*

A hard slap and he was jolted awake. A seamed, tusked face hovered over him. Vertical pupils set in grey, the whites barely visible. *Like a damned goat.*

'You,' the Jaghut said, 'are a bad choice for this. Answering despair with laughter like that.'

Skintick stared up at the creature. He couldn't think of anything to say.

'There is a last moment,' Gothos continued, 'when every sentient creature alive realizes that it's over, that not enough was done, that hindsight doesn't survive dying. Not enough was done – you Tiste Andii understood that.

Anomander Rake did. He realized that to dwell in but one world was madness. To survive, you must spread like vermin. Rake tore his people loose from their complacency. And for this he was cursed.'

'I saw – I saw a world dying.'

'If that is what you saw, then so it is. Somewhere, somewhen. On the paths of the Azath, a distant world slides into oblivion. Potential snuffed out. What did you feel, Skintick?'

'I felt . . . free.'

The Jaghut straightened. 'As I said, a bad choice.'

'Where – where is Nimander?'

Sounds at the doorway—

Desra rushed into the chamber. She saw Skintick, saw him slowly sitting up. She saw what must be the Jaghut, the hood drawn back to reveal that greenish, unhuman visage, the hairless pate so mottled it might have been a mariner's map of islands, a tortured coastline, reefs. He stood tall in his woollen robes.

But nowhere could she find Nimander.

The Jaghut's eyes fixed on her for a moment, and then he faced one of the walls of ice.

She followed that gaze.

Staggering into darkness he was struck countless times. Fists pounded, fingers raked ragged furrows through his skin. Hands closed about his limbs and pulled.

'This one is mine!'

'No, mine!'

All at once voices cried out on all sides and a hand closed about Nimander's waist, plucked him into the air. The giant figure carrying him

ran, feet thumping like thunder, up a steep slope, rocks scurrying down, first a trickle, then a roar of cascading stones, with screams in their wake.

Choking dust blinded him.

A sharp-edged crest crunching underfoot, and then a sudden even steeper descent, down into a caldera. Grey clouds rising in plumes, sudden coruscating heat foul with gases that stung his eyes, burned in his throat.

He was flung on to hot ash.

The giant creature loomed over him.

Through tears Nimander looked up, saw a strangely child-like face peering down. The forehead sloped back behind an undulating brow-ridge from which the eyebrows streamed down in thick snarls of pale, almost white hair. Round, smooth cheeks, thick lips, a pug nose, a pale bulging wattle beneath the rounded chin. Its skin was bright yellow, its eyes emerald green.

It spoke in the language of the Tiste Andii. 'I am like you. I too do not belong here.'

The voice was soft, a child's voice. The giant slowly blinked, and then smiled, revealing a row of dagger-like fangs.

Nimander struggled to speak. 'Where – who – all those people . . .'

'Spirits. Trapped like ants in amber. But it is not amber. It is the blood of dragons.'

'Are you a spirit?'

The huge head shook in a negative. 'I am an Elder, and I am lost.'

'Elder.' Nimander frowned. 'You call yourself that. Why?'

A shrug like hills in motion. 'The spirits have so named me.'

'How did you come to be here?'

'I don't know. I am lost, you see.'

'And before this place?'

'Somewhere else. I built things. Of stone. But each house I built then vanished – I know not where. It was most . . . frustrating.'

'Do you have a name?'

'Elder?'

'Nothing else?'

'Sometimes, I would carve the stone. To make it look like wood. Or bone. I remember . . . sunsets. Different suns, each night, different suns. Sometimes two. Sometimes three, one fierce, the others like children. I would build another house, if I could. I think, if I could do that, I would stop being lost.'

Nimander sat up. He was covered in volcanic dust, so fine it shed from him like liquid. 'Build your house, then.'

'Whenever I begin, the spirits attack me. Hundreds, then thousands. Too many.'

'I stepped through a wall of ice.' The memory was suddenly strong. 'Omtose Phellack—'

'Oh, ice is like blood and blood is like ice. There are many ways in. None out. You do not belong here because you are not yet dead. You are lost, like me. We should be friends, I think.'

'I can't stay—'

'I am sorry.'

Panic seethed to life in Nimander. He stood, sinking to his shins in the hot ash. 'I can't – Gothos. Find me. *Gothos!'*

'I remember Gothos.' A terrible frown lowered the Elder's brows. 'He would appear, just before the last stone was set. He would look upon my house and pronounce it adequate. Adequate! Oh, how I hated that word! My sweat, my blood, and he called them adequate! And then he would walk

inside and close the door, and I would place the last stone, and the house would vanish! I don't think I like Gothos.'

'I don't blame you,' Nimander said, unwilling to voice his suspicion that Gothos's arrival and the vanishing of the houses were in fact connected; that indeed the Jaghut came to *collect* them. *This Elder builds the Houses of the Azath. And he is lost.*

'Tell me,' Nimander said, 'do you think there are others like you? Others, out there, building houses?'

'I don't know.'

Nimander looked round. The jagged walls of the cone enclosed the space. Enormous chunks of pumice and obsidian lay half buried in the grey dust. 'Elder, do the spirits ever assail you here?'

'In my pit? No, they cannot climb the sides.'

'Build your house here.'

'But—'

'Use the rim as your foundation.'

'But houses have corners!'

'Make it a tower.'

'A house . . . within the blood of dragons? But there are no sunsets.'

*A house within the blood of dragons. What would happen? What would change? Why do the spirits deny him this?* 'If you are tired of being lost,' Nimander said, 'build a house. But before you are done, before you set that last stone, walk into it.' He paused and looked round, then grunted a laugh. 'You won't have any choice; you will be building the thing from the inside out.'

'But then who will finish it?'

Nimander looked away. He was trapped here, possibly for ever. If he did as Gothos did, if he remained inside the house to await its completion, he

might find a way out. He might walk those hidden pathways. And in so doing, he would doom this creature to eternity here. This child, this mason.

*And that I cannot do. I am not like Gothos. I am not that cruel.*

He heard laughter in his head. Phaed, shrieking with laughter. Then she said, *'Don't be an idiot. Take the way out. Leave this fool to his building blocks! He's pathetic!'*

'I will set the last stone,' Nimander said. 'Just make sure it's small enough for me to lift and push into place.' And he looked up, and he saw that the giant was smiling, and no, it no longer looked like a child, and in its eyes something shone and its light flowed down, bathed Nimander.

'I am different,' the Elder said in a deep, warm voice, *'when I build.'*

'Get him out,' Desra said.

'I cannot.'

'Why?'

The Jaghut blinked like a lizard. 'I don't know how. The gate is Omtose Phellack, but the realm beyond is something else, something I want nothing to do with.'

'But you made this gate – and gates open from both sides.'

'I doubt he could ever find it,' the Jaghut said. 'Even assuming anyone lets him get close.'

'Anyone? Who's in there with him?'

'A few million miserable wretches.'

Desra glared at Skintick. 'How could you let this happen?'

He was weeping and could only shake his head.

'Do not blame this one,' the Jaghut said. 'Do not blame anyone. Accidents happen.'

'You drugged us,' Skintick suddenly accused him, his voice harsh with grief.

'Alas, I did. And I had my reasons for doing so . . . which seem to have failed. Therefore I must be more . . . direct, and oh how I dislike being direct. When next you see Anomander, tell him this from me: he chose wisely. Each time, he chose wisely. Tell him, then, that of all whom I ever met, there is but one who has earned my respect, and he is that one.'

A sudden sob from Skintick.

Desra felt strangely shaken by the Jaghut's words.

'And,' the Jaghut then added, 'for you. Do not trust Kallor.'

Feeling helpless, useless, she stepped closer to the wall of ice, squinted into its dark depths.

'Careful, woman. That blood pulls hard on you Tiste.'

And yes, she could feel that, but it was nothing to trust, nothing to even pay attention to – it was the lie she had always known, the lie of something better just ahead, of all the questions answered, just ahead. *Another step, one more. One more.* Time's dialogue with the living, and time was a deceitful creature, a liar. Time promised everything and delivered nothing.

She stared into the darkness, and thought she saw movement, deep, deep within.

'No Jaghut is to be trusted,' Kallor said, glaring at the lowering sun. 'Especially not Gothos.'

Aranatha studied the ancient warrior with an unwavering gaze, and though he would not meet her sister's eyes, it was clear to Kedeviss that Kallor felt himself under siege. A woman's attention, devastating barrage of inexorable calculation – even a warrior flinched back.

But these were momentary distractions, she knew. Something had happened. Desra had rushed into the ruin and not returned. Nenanda stood fidgeting, eyes on the crumbled edifice.

'Some gods are born to suffer,' Kallor said. 'You'd be better off heading straight to Coral. Unleash Anomander Rake against that Dying God, if getting this Clip back is so important to you. At the very least you'll have your vengeance.'

'And is vengeance so important?' Kedeviss asked.

'Often it's all there is,' Kallor replied, still squinting westward.

'Is that why they're after you?'

He turned, studied her. 'And who would be after me?'

'Someone. That much seems obvious. Am I wrong?'

Aranatha spoke from the wagon, 'You are not, sister. But then, he has always been hunted. You can see it in his eyes.'

'Be glad that you remain marginally useful to me,' Kallor said, turning away once more.

Kedeviss saw Nenanda glaring at the warrior's back.

How much time had passed? Days, perhaps weeks. Nimander stood, watching the mason build his tower. Shaping stone with fists, with round hammerstones found somewhere, with leather-wrapped wooden mallets to edge the pumice facing he had decided to add to 'lighten the walls'.

To accommodate the giant, the tower needed to be huge, four storeys or more to the ceiling. *'Made with the blood of dragons, the glass of what flowed, the pumice of what foamed with dying breaths. A tower, yes, but also a monument, a grave marker. What will come of this? I know not. You were clever, Nimander, with this idea. Too clever to stay here. You must leave, when the tower vanishes, you must be within it. I will stay.'*

They repeated that argument again and again, and each time Nimander prevailed, not through brilliant reasoning, not through appealing to the Elder's selfish desires (because it turned out he didn't have any), but only through his refusal to surrender.

He had nothing awaiting him, after all. Nenanda could lead the others through – he was finding his own kind of wisdom, his restraint, and with Skintick and Kedeviss to guide him, he would do well. Until such time as they reached Coral.

Nimander had lost too many battles – he could see that in himself. Could feel every scar, still fresh, still wounding. This place would give him time to heal, if such a thing were possible. How long? *Why not eternity?* A chorus of wails surrounded them, an army of spirits grovelling in the ash and dust at the base of the volcanic cone. Bemoaning the end of the world – as if this world suited them just fine, when clearly it didn't, when each one dreamed of reclaiming flesh and bone, blood and breath. They sought to assail the slope but somehow failed again and again.

Nimander helped when he could, carrying tools here and there, but mostly he sat in the soft dust, seeing nothing, hearing only the cries from beyond the tower's growing wall, feeling neither thirst nor hunger, slowly emptying of desire, ambition, everything that might once have mattered.

Around him the darkness deepened, until the only light came from some preternatural glow from the pumice. The world closing in . . .

Until—

'One stone remains. This stone. The base of this low window, Nimander, within your reach. I will help you climb outside – then push the stone through, like this – but tell me, please, why can we not both leave here? I am within the tower. So are you. If I set the stone—'

'Elder,' cut in Nimander. 'You are almost done here. Where is Gothos?'

A look of surprise. 'I don't know.'

'He does not dare this realm, I think.'

'Perhaps that is true.'

'I don't even know if this will work – if it will create for you a way out.'

'I understand, Nimander. Remain inside with me. Let me set this stone.'

'I don't know where this tower will take you,' Nimander replied. 'Back to your realm, wherever that is, perhaps – but not my home. Nothing I know. Besides, you carved this to be pushed into place from outside – the angles —'

'I can reshape it, Nimander.'

*I cannot go with you.* 'In finding out where you are, Elder, I become lost. You are the mason, the maker of the houses. It is your task. You do not belong here.'

'Nor do you.'

'Don't I? There are Tiste Andii spirits out there. And Tiste Edur. Even Liosan. The ones who fell in the first wars, when dragons burst through every gate to slay, to die. Listen to them out there! They have made peace with one another – a miracle, and one I would be happy to share.'

'You are not a ghost. They will take you. They will fight over you, a beginning of a new war, Nimander. They will tear you to pieces.'

'No, I will reason with them—'

'You cannot.'

Despair stirred awake in Nimander, as he saw the truth of the Elder's words. Even here, he was not welcome. Even here he would bring destruction. *Yet, when they tear me limb from limb, I will die. I will become just like them. A short war.* 'Help me through the window,' he said, pulling himself up on to the rough ledge.

'As you wish. I understand, Nimander.'

*Yes, perhaps you do.*

'Nimander.'

'Yes?'

'Thank you. For this gift of creation.'

'Next time you meet Gothos,' Nimander said as his friend pushed him through the portal, 'punch him in the face for me, will you?'

'Yes, another good idea. I will miss you. You and your good ideas.'

He fell through on to a thick powdery slope, hastily reaching up to grip the window's edge to keep from sliding. Behind and below voices cried out in sudden hunger. He could feel their will churning up to engulf him.

A heavy scrape from the window and out came the final stone, end first, grinding as it was forced through. Catching Nimander by surprise. The weight pushed against his fingers where he held tight and he swore in pain as the tips were crushed, pinned – tearing one hand free left nails behind, droplets of blood spattering. He scrabbled for another handhold, then, voicing a scream, he tore loose his other arm.

Gods, how was he going to manage this? With two mangled hands, with no firm footing, with a mob surging frantic up the slope behind him?

Inexorable, the stone ground its way out. He brought a shoulder beneath it, felt the massive weight settling. His arms began to tremble.

Far enough now, yes, and he reached with one hand, began pushing to one side the nearest end of the bloodslick chunk of obsidian. He could see the clever angles now, the planes and how everything would somehow, seemingly impossibly, slide into perfect position. Push, some more – not much – almost in place—

Thousands, hundreds of thousands – a storm of voices, screams of desperation, of dismay, of terrible horror – *too much! Please, stop! Stop!*

He was weakening – he would not make it – he could not hold on any longer – with a sob he released his grip and in the last moment, tottering, he pushed with both hands, setting the stone – and then he was falling, back, down, swallowed in cascading ash, stones, scouring chunks of rough pumice. Down the slope he tumbled, buried beneath ever more rubble. Hot. Suffocating. Blind. Drowning – and one flailing hand was grasped, hard, by one and then two hands – small – a woman's hands.

His shoulder flared in pain as that grip tightened, pulled him round. The collapsing hillside tugged at him, eager to take him – he understood its need, he sympathized, yes, and wanted to relent, to let go, to vanish in the crushing darkness.

The hands dragged him free. Dragged him by one bloody arm. The storm of voices raged anew, closer now and closing fast. Cold fingertips scrabbled against his boots, nails clawing at his ankles and oh he didn't care, let them take him, let them—

He tumbled down on to damp earth. Gloom, silence but for harsh breaths, a surprised grunt from nearby.

Rolling on to his back, coughing through a mouth caked in ash. Eyes burning—

Desra knelt over him, her head down, her face twisted in pain as she held her arms like two broken wings in her lap. Skintick, rushing close to crouch beside him.

'I thought – she—'

'How long?' Nimander demanded. 'How could you have waited so long? Clip—'

'What? It's been but moments, Nimander. Desra – she came in, she saw into the ice – saw you—'

Fire burned his fingers, flicked flames up his hands and into his wrists, sizzling fierce along the bones. Fresh blood dripped from dust-caked wounds where nails had been. 'Desra,' he moaned. 'Why?'

She looked up, fixed him with hard eyes. 'We're not finished with you yet, Nimander,' she said in a rasp. 'Oh no, not yet.'

'You damned fool,' Gothos said. 'I was saving that one for later. And now he's free.'

Nimander twisted round. 'You cannot just *collect* people! Like shiny stones!'

'Why not? My point is, I needed that one. There is now an Azath in the blood of dragons—'

'The spilled blood – the blood of dead dragons—'

'And you think the distinction is important? Oh, me and my endless folly!' With sharp gestures he raised his hood once more, then turned to settle down on a stool, facing the hearth, his position a perfect match to the moment Nimander, Skintick and Kallor had first entered this place. 'You idiot, Nimander. Dragons don't play games. Do you understand me? *Dragons play no games.* Ah, I despair, or I would if I cared enough. No, instead, I will make some ashcakes. Which I will not share.'

'It's time to leave,' Skintick said.

Yes, that much was obvious.

*

'They're coming now,' Kallor said.

Kedeviss looked but could not see any movement in the gloom of the ruin's entrance.

'It's too late to travel – we'll have to camp here. Make us a fine meal, Aranatha. Nenanda, build a fire. A house of sticks to set aflame – that'll make Gothos wince, I hope. Yes, entice him out here tonight, so that I can kill him.'

'You can't kill him,' Aranatha said, straightening in the wagon bed.

'Oh, and why not?'

'I need to talk to him.'

Kedeviss watched her kin descend from the wagon, adjust her robes, then stride towards the ruin – where Skintick had appeared, helping Nimander, whose hands were dark with blood. Behind them, Desra.

'That bitch sister of yours is uncanny,' Kallor said in a growl.

Kedeviss saw no need to comment on that.

'She speaks with Gothos – why? What could they possibly say to each other?'

Shrugging, Kedeviss turned away. 'I think I will do the cooking tonight,' she said.

Dying, the Captain stared across at the giant warrior with the shattered face. Woven carpets beneath each of them, the one on which sat the Captain now sodden with blood – blood that seemed to flow for ever, as if his body was but a valve, broken, jammed open, and out it came, trickling down from wounds that would never close. He was, he realized, back where he began. Opulence surrounded him this time, rather than grit and mud and dust on the edge of a dried riverbed, but did that make any real difference? Clearly it didn't.

Only the dying could laugh at that truth. There were many things, he now understood, to which only the dying could respond with honest mirth. Like this nemesis warrior sitting cross-legged, hunched and glowering opposite him.

A small brazier smouldered between them, perched on three legs. On the coals rested a squat kettle, and the spiced wine within steamed to sweeten the air of the chamber.

'You shall have to knock out some of the inner walls,' the Captain said. 'Have the slaves make you a new bed, one long enough, and other furniture besides.'

'You are not listening,' the giant said. 'I lose my temper when people do not listen.'

'You are my heir—'

'No. I am not. Slavery is an abomination. Slavery is what people who hate do to others. They hate themselves. They hate in order to make themselves different, better. You. You told yourself you had the right to own other people. You told yourself they were less than you, and you thought shackles could prove it.'

'I loved my slaves. I took care of them.'

'There is plenty of room for guilt in the heart of hate,' the warrior replied.

'This is my gift—'

'Everyone seeks to give me gifts. I reject them all. You believe yours is wondrous. Generous. You are nothing. Your empire is pathetic. I knew village dogs who were greater tyrants than you.'

'Why do you torment me with such words? I am dying. You have killed me. And yet I do not despise you for that. No, I make you my heir. I give you my kingdom. My army will take your commands. Everything is yours now.'

'I don't want it.'

'If you do not take it, one of my officers will.'

'This kingdom cannot exist without the slaves. Your army will become nothing more than one more band of raiders, and so someone will hunt them down and destroy them. And all you sought to build will be forgotten.'

'You torment me.'

'I tell you the truth. Let your officers come to kill me. I will destroy them all. And I will scatter your army. Blood to the grass.'

The Captain stared at this monster, and knew he could do nothing. He was sinking back against his heap of pillows, every breath shallower than the last. Swathed in robes and furs, he was none the less cold. 'You could have lied,' he whispered.

The man's last words. Karsa studied the dead face for a moment longer. Then he thumped against the panel door to his left.

It opened a crack.

'Everyone leave this carriage,' Karsa commanded. 'Take whatever you want – but you do not have much time.'

Then he settled back once more. Scanned the remnants of the lavish feast he had devoured – while the Captain had simply watched, smug as a rich father even as he died. But Karsa was not his son. Not his heir, no matter

what the fool desired. He was Toblakai. A Teblor, and far to the north waited his people.

Was he ready for them?

He was.

Would they be ready for him? Probably not.

A long walk awaited him – there was not a single horse in this paltry kingdom that could accommodate him. He thought back to his youth, to those bright days of hard drama, crowded with omens, when every blade of grass was saturated with significance – but it was the young mind that fashioned such things. Not yet bleached by the sun, not yet worn down by the wind. Vistas were to be crossed. Foes were to be vanquished with harsh barks of fierce triumph, blood spraying in the air.

Once, long ago it seemed now, he had set out to find glory, only to discover that it was nothing like what he had imagined it to be. It was a brutal truth that his companions then had understood so much better than he had, despite his being War Leader. Nevertheless, they had let themselves be pulled into his wake, and for this they had died. The power of Karsa's own will had overwhelmed them. What could be learned from that?

Followers will follow, even unto their own deaths. There was a flaw to such people – the willingness to override one's own instinct for self-preservation. And this flaw invited exploitation, perhaps even *required* it. Confusion and uncertainty surrendered to simplicity, so comforting, so deadly.

Without followers this Captain would have achieved nothing. The same the world over. Wars would disintegrate into the chaos of raids, skirmishes, massacres of the innocent, the vendetta of blood-feuds, and little else. Monuments would never be raised. No temples, no streets and roads, no cities. No ships, no bridges. Every patch of ploughed land would shrink to what a few could manage. Without followers, civilization would never have been born.

He would tell his people all this. He would make them not his followers, but his companions. And together they would bring civilization to ruin, whenever and wherever they found it. Because, for all the good it created, its sole purpose was to breed followers – enough to heave into motion forces of destruction, spreading a tide of blood at the whim of those few cynical tyrants born to lead. Lead, yes, with lies, with iron words – *duty, honour, patriotism, freedom* – that fed the wilfully stupid with grand purpose, with reason for misery and delivering misery in kind.

He had seen the enemy's face, its twin masks of abject self-sacrifice and cold-eyed command. He had seen leaders feed on the flesh of the bravely fallen. *And this is not the Teblor way. It shall not be my way.*

The sounds of looting from the rooms around him were gone now. Silence on all sides. Karsa reached down and used a hook to lift the kettle from the coals and set it down on the small table amidst the foodstuffs, the silver plates and the polished goblets.

Then he kicked the brazier over, scattering coals on to the beautifully woven carpets, into the silks and woollen blankets, the furs. He waited to see flames ignite.

When the first ones began, Karsa Orlong rose and, hunched over to clear the panel door, made his way out.

Darkness in the world beyond the camp's cookfires. A mad profusion of stars overhead. Arrayed in a vast semi-circle facing the enormous carriage was the kingdom of the Captain. Karsa Orlong stood in front of the throne on the balcony.

'The slaves are free,' he said in a loud voice that carried to everyone. 'The officers will divide the loot, the horses and all the rest – an equal share for all, slaves and free, soldier and crafter. Cheat anyone and I will kill you.'

Behind him on the carriage, flames licked out from the countless windows and vents. Black smoke rose in a thickening column. He could feel the heat gusting against his back.

'Come the dawn,' he said, 'everyone will leave. Go home. Those without a home – go find one. And know that the time I give you now is all that you will ever have. For when next you see me, when you are hiding there in your cities, I will come as a destroyer. Five years or twenty – it is what you have, what I give you. Use it well. All of you, *live well.'*

And that such a farewell should be received, not as a benediction, but as a threat, marked well how these people understood Karsa Orlong – who came from the north, immune to all weapons. Who slew the Captain without even touching him. Who freed the slaves and scattered the knights of the realm with not a single clash of swords.

The god of the Broken Face came among them, as each would tell others for the years left to them. And, so telling, with eyes wide and licking dry lips, they would reach in haste for the tankard and its nectar of forgetfulness.

*Some, you cannot kill. Some are deliverers of death and judgement. Some, in wishing you a full life, promise you death. There is no lie in that promise, for does not death come to us all? And yet, how rare the one to say so. No sweet euphemism, no quaint colloquialism. No metaphor, no analogy. There is but one true poet in the world, and he speaks the truth.*

*Flee, my friends, but there is nowhere to hide. Nowhere at all.*

*See your fate, there in his Broken Face.*

*See it well.*

Horses drawn to a halt on a low hilltop, grasses whispering unseen on all sides.

'I once led armies,' Traveller said. 'I was once the will of the Emperor of Malaz.'

Samar Dev tasted bitterness and leaned to one side and spat.

The man beside her grunted, as if acknowledging the gesture as commentary. 'We served death, of course, in all that we did. For all our claims otherwise. Imposing peace, ending stupid feuds and tribal rivalries.

Opening roads to merchants without fear of banditry. Coin flowed like blood in veins, such was the gift of those roads and the peace we enforced. And yet, behind it all, *he* waited.'

'All hail civilization,' Samar Dev said. 'Like a beacon in the dark wilderness.'

'With a cold smile,' Traveller continued, as if not hearing her, 'he waits. Where all the roads converge, where every path ends. He waits.'

A dozen heartbeats passed, with nothing more said.

To the north something burned, lancing bright orange flames into the sky, lighting the bellies of churning clouds of black smoke. *Like a beacon . . .*

'What burns?' Traveller wondered.

Samar Dev spat again. She just couldn't get that foul taste out of her mouth. 'Karsa Orlong,' she replied. 'Karsa Orlong burns, Traveller. Because that is what he does.'

'I do not understand you.'

'It's a pyre,' she said. 'And he does not grieve. The Skathandi are no more.'

'When you speak of Karsa Orlong,' Traveller said, 'I am frightened.'

She nodded at that admission – a response he probably could not even see. The man beside her was an honest one.

In many ways as honest as Karsa Orlong.

And on the morrow these two would meet.

Samar Dev well understood Traveller's fear.

# CHAPTER NINE

The bulls ever walk alone to the solitude
Of their selves
Swaggering in their coats of sweaty felt
Every vein swollen
Defiant and proud in their beastly need
Thunderous in step
Make way make way the spurting swords
Slay damsel hearts
Cloven the cut gaping wide – so tender an attitude!
And we must swoon
Before red-rimmed eyes you'll find no guilt
In the self so proven
And the fiery charge of most fertile seed
Sings like gods' rain
Make way make way another bold word
The dancer's sure to misstep
In the rushing drums of the multitude

*Dandies of the Promenade*
Seglora

Expectation is the hoary curse of humanity. One can listen to words, and see them as the unfolding of a petal or, indeed, the very opposite: each word bent and pushed tighter, smaller, until the very packet of meaning vanishes with a flip of deft fingers. Poets and tellers of tales can be tugged by either current, into the riotous conflagration of beauteous language or the pithy reduction of the tersely colourless.

As with art, so too with life. See a man without fingers standing at the back of his house. He is grainy with sleep that yields no rest, no relief from a burdensome world (and all that), and his eyes are strangely blank and might be shuttered too as he stares out on the huddled form of his wife as she works some oddity in her vegetable patch.

This one is terse. Existence is a most narrow aperture indeed. His failing is not in being inarticulate through some lack of intellect. No, this mind is most finely honed. But he views his paucity of words – in both thought and dialogue – as a virtue, sigil of rigid manhood. He has made brevity an obsession, an addiction, and in his endless paring down he strips away all hope of emotion and with it empathy. When language is lifeless what does it serve? When meaning is rendered down what veracity holds to the illusion of depth?

*Bah!* to such conceits! Such anal self-serving affectation! Wax extravagant and let the world swirl thick and pungent about you! Tell the tale of your life as you would live it!

A delighted waggle of fingers now might signal mocking cruelty when you are observing this fingerless man who stands silent and expressionless as he studies his woman. Decide as you will. *His woman.* Yes, the notion belongs to him, artfully whittled from his world view (one of expectation and fury at its perpetual failure). Possession has its rules and she must behave within the limits those rules prescribe. This was, to Gaz, self-evident, a detail that did not survive his own manic editing.

But what was Thordy doing with all those flat stones? With that peculiar pattern she was building there in the dark loamy soil? One could plant nothing beneath stone, could one? No, she was sacrificing fertile ground,

and for what? He didn't know. And he knew that he might never know. As an activity, however, Thordy's diligent pursuit was a clear transgression of the rules, and he might have to do something about that. Soon.

Tonight he would beat a man to death. Exultation, yes, but a cold kind. Flies buzzing in his head, the sound rising like a wave, filling his skull with a hundred thousand icy legs. He would do that, yes, and this meant he didn't have to beat his wife – not yet, anyway; a few more days, maybe a week or so – he would have to see how things went.

Keep things simple, give the flies not much to land on, that was the secret. The secret to staying sane.

The wedges of his battered fingerless hands burned with eager fire.

But he wasn't thinking much of anything at all, was he? Nothing to reach his face, his eyes, the flat line of his mouth. Sigil of manhood, this blank façade, and when a man has nothing else at least he could have that. And he would prove it to himself again and again. Night after night.

Because this is what artists did.

Thordy was thinking of many things, none of them particularly relevant – or so she would have judged if pressed to examination, although of course there was no one who might voice such a challenge, which was just as well. Here in her garden she could float, as aimless as a leaf blown down on to a slow, lazy river.

She was thinking about freedom. She was thinking about how a mind could turn to stone, the patterns solid and immovable in the face of seemingly unbearable pressures, and the way dust trickled down faint as whispers, unnoticed by any. And she was thinking of the cool, polished surface of these slate slabs, the waxy feel of them, and the way the sun reflected soft, milky white and not at all painful to rest eyes upon. And she was remembering the way her husband talked in his sleep, a pouring forth of words as if whatever dam held them back in his wakefulness was kicked down and out gushed tales of gods and promises, invitations and bloodlust, the pain of maimed hands and the pain of maiming that those hands delivered.

And she noted the butterflies dancing above the row of greens just off to her left, almost within reach if she stretched out a dirt-stained hand, but then those orange-winged sprites would wing away though she posed them no threat. Because life was uncertain and danger waited in the guise of peaceful repose.

And her knees ached and nowhere in her thoughts could be found expectation – nowhere could be found such hard-edged proof of reality as the framework of what waited somewhere ahead. No hint at all, even as she laid down stone after stone. It was all outside, you see, all outside.

The clerk at the office of the Guild of Blacksmiths had never once in his life wielded hammer and tongs. What he did wield demanded no muscles, no weight of impetus atop oaken legs, no sweat streaming down to sting the eyes, no gusts of scalding heat to singe the hairs on the forearms. And so, in the face of a true blacksmith, the clerk gloried in his power.

That pleasure could be seen in his small pursed lips turned well down at each end, could be caught in his watery eyes that rested everywhere and nowhere; in his pale hands holding a wooden stylus like an assassin's dagger, the tip stained blue by ink and wax. He sat on his stool behind the broad counter that divided the front room as if guarding the world's wealth and every promise of paradise that membership in this most noble Guild offered its hallowed, upright members (and the fat man winks).

So he sat, and so Barathol Mekhar wanted to reach over the counter, pluck the clerk into the air, and break him in half. Over and over again, until little more than a pile of brittle tailings remained heaped on the scarred counter, with the stylus thrust into it like a warrior's sword stabbing a barrow.

Dark was the amusement in Barathol's thoughts as the clerk shook his head yet again.

'It is simple – even for you, I'm sure. The Guild demands credentials, specifically the sponsorship of an accredited Guild member. Without this, your coin is so much dross.' And he smiled at this clever pun voiced to a smith.

'I am new to Darujhistan,' Barathol said, again, 'and so such sponsorship is impossible.'

'Yes it is.'

'As for apprenticeship—'

'Also impossible. You say you have been a blacksmith for many years now and I do not doubt such a claim – the evidence is plain before me. This of course makes you overqualified as an apprentice and too old besides.'

'If I cannot be apprenticed how can I get a sponsor?'

A smile of the lips and shake of the head. A holding up of the palms. 'I don't make the rules, you understand.'

'Can I speak to anyone who might have been involved in devising these rules?'

'A blacksmith? No, alas, they are all off doing smithy things, as befits their profession.'

'I can visit one at his or her place of work, then. Can you direct me to the nearest one?'

'Absolutely not. They have entrusted me with the responsibilities of operating the administration of the Guild. If I were to do something like that I would be disciplined for dereliction of duty, and I am sure you do not want that on your conscience, do you?'

'Actually,' said Barathol, 'that is a guilt I can live with.'

The expression hardened. 'Honourable character is an essential prerequisite to becoming a member of the Guild.'

'More than sponsorship?'

'They are balanced virtues, sir. Now, I am very busy today—'

'You were sleeping when I stepped in.'

'It may have appeared that way.'

'It appeared that way because it was that way.'

'I have no time to argue with you over what you may or may not have perceived when you stepped into my office—'

'You were asleep.'

'You might have concluded such a thing.'

'I did conclude it, because that is what you were. I suppose that too might result in disciplinary measures, once it becomes known to the members.'

'Your word against mine, and clearly you possess an agenda, one that reflects poorly on your sense of honour—' 'Since when does honesty reflect poorly on one's sense of honour?'

The clerk blinked. 'Why, when it is vindictive, of course.'

Now it was Barathol's turn to pause. And attempt a new tack. 'I can pay an advance on my dues – a year's worth or more, if necessary.'

'Without sponsorship such payment would be construed as a donation. There is legal precedent to back that interpretation.'

'You'd take my coin and give me nothing in return?'

'That is the essence of a charitable donation, is it not?'

'I don't think it is, but never mind that. What you are telling me is that I cannot become a member of the Guild of Blacksmiths.'

'Membership is open to all blacksmiths wishing to work in the city, I assure you. Once you have been sponsored.'

'Which makes it a closed shop.'

'A what?'

'The Malazan Empire encountered closed shops in Seven Cities. They broke them wide open. I think even some blood was spilled. The Emperor was not one to cringe before professional monopolies of any sort.'

'Well,' the clerk said, licking his slivery lips, 'thank all the gods the Malazans never conquered Darujhistan!'

Barathol stepped outside and saw Mallet waiting across the street, eating some kind of flavoured ice in a broad-leaf cone. The morning's heat was fast melting the confection, and purple water was trickling down the healer's pudgy hand. His lips were similarly stained.

Mallet's thin brows rose as the blacksmith approached. 'Are you now a proud if somewhat poorer member of the Guild?'

'No. They refused me.'

'But why? Can you not take some kind of exam—'

'No.'

'Oh . . . so now what, Barathol?'

'What? Oh, I'll open up a smithy anyway. Independent.'

'Are you mad? They'll burn you out. Smash up your equipment. Descend on you in a mob and beat you to death. And that's just on opening day.'

Barathol smiled. He liked Malazans. Despite everything, despite the countless mistakes the Empire had made, all the blood spilled, he liked the bastards. Hood knew, they weren't nearly as fickle as the natives of his homeland. Or, he added wryly, the citizens of Darujhistan. To Mallet's predictions he said, 'I've handled worse. Don't worry about me. I plan on working here as a blacksmith, whether the Guild likes it or not. And eventually they will have to accept me as a member.'

'That won't feel very triumphant if you're dead.'

'I won't be. Dead, that is.'

'They'll try to stop anyone doing business with you.'

'I am very familiar with Malazan weapons and armour, Mallet. My work meets military standards in your old empire, and as you know, those are set high.' He glanced across at the healer. 'Will the Guild scare you off? Your friends?'

'Of course not. But remember, we're retired.'

'And being hunted by assassins.'

'Ah, I'd forgotten about that. You have a point. Even so, Barathol, I doubt us few Malazans can keep you in business for very long.'

'The new embassy has a company of guards.'

'True.'

'And there are other Malazans living here. Deserters from the campaigns up north—' 'That's true, too, though they tend to hide from us – not that we care. In fact, we'd rather get their business at the bar. What's the point in grudges?'

'Those that come to me will be told just that, then, and so we can help each other.'

Mallet tossed the sodden cone away and wiped his hands on his leggings. 'They tasted better when I was a young brat – although they were more expensive since a witch was needed to make the ice in the first place. Here, of course, it's to do with some of the gases in the caverns below.'

Barathol thought about that for a moment as he looked upon the healer with his purple lips and saw, for the briefest moment, how this man had been when he was a child, and then he smiled once more. 'I need to find a suitable location for my smithy. Will you walk with me, Mallet?'

'Glad to,' the healer replied. 'Now, I know the city – what precisely are you looking for?'

And so Barathol told him.

And oh how Mallet laughed and off they went into the city's dark chambers of the heart, where blood flowed in a roar and all manner of deviousness was possible. If the mind was so inclined. A mind such as Barathol Mekhar's when down – *down!* – was thrown the ghastly gauntlet!

The ox, the selfsame ox, swung its head back and forth as it pulled the cartload of masonry into the arched gateway, into blessed shade for a few

clumping strides, and then out into the bright heat once more – delicate blond lashes fluttering – to find itself in a courtyard and somewhere close was sweet cool water, the sound as it trickled an invitation, the smell soft as a kiss upon the broad glistening nose with its even more delicate blond hairs, and up rose the beast's massive head and would not the man with the switch have pity on this weary, thirsty ox?

He would not. The cart needed unloading first and so the ox must stand, silently yearning, jaws working the cud of breakfast with loud, thick sounds of suction and wetly clunking molars, and the flies were maddening but what could be done about flies? Nothing at all, not until the chill of night sent them away and so left the ox to sleep, upright in bovine majesty beneath stars (if one was lucky) which, perhaps, was where the flies slept.

Of course, to know the mind of an ox is to waste inordinate amounts of time before recognizing the placid civility of a herbivore's sensibilities. Lift gaze, then, to the two vaguely shifty characters edging in through the gate – not workers struggling to and fro in the midst of the old estate's refurbishment; not clerks nor servants; not masons nor engineers nor inspectors nor weight-gaugers nor measurers. To all appearances malingerers, skulkers, but in truth even worse than that—

Twelve names on the list. One happily struck off. Eleven others found and then escaped like the slippery eels they no doubt were, being hunted by debt, ill luck and the vagaries of a clearly malicious universe intent on delivering misery and whatnot. But no matter such failure among the thugs sent out to enforce collection or deliver punishment – not the problem of these men, now, was it?

Bereft of all burdens, blessed with exquisite freedom, Scorch and Leff were here, in this soon-to-be-opulent estate that was even now rising from the dust of neglect and decay to enshroud like a cloak of jewels the mysterious arrival of a nobleborn – a woman, it was rumoured, all veiled, but see the eyes! *Eyes of such beauty! Why, imagine them widening as I reach down*— Scorch and Leff, edging in nervously, barely emerging from the shadow of the arched gate. Peering round, as if lost, as if moments from

running off with stolen chunks of masonry or an armload of bricks or even a bag of iron wedges—

'Ho – you two! What do you want here?'

Starting guiltily. Scorch staring wide-eyed at the grizzled foreman walking up to them – a Gadrobi so bowlegged he looked to be wading hip-deep through mud. Leff ducking his head as if instinctively dodging an axe – which said a lot about his life thus far, didn't it – and then stepping one small pace forward and attempting a smile that fared so poorly it could not even be described as a grimace.

'Is there a castellan we could talk to?' Leff asked.

'About what?'

'Gate guards,' Leff said. 'We got lots of qualifications.'

'Oh. Any of them relevant?'

'What?'

Leff looked at Scorch and saw the panic spreading like a wildfire on his friend's face. A match to his own growing dismay – madness, thinking they could just step up another rung on the ladder. Madness! 'We . . . we could walk her dogs, I mean?'

'You could? I suppose you could, if the Mistress had any.'

'Does she?' Leff asked.

'Does she what?'

'Have any. Dogs we could walk.'

'Not even ones you can't walk.'

'We can guard the gate!' Scorch shouted. 'That's what we're here for! To get hired on, you see, as estate guards. And if you don't think we can swing a sword or use a crossbow, why, you don't know us at all, do you?'

'No, you're right,' the foreman replied. 'I don't.'

Leff scowled. 'You don't what?'

'Stay here,' the old man said, turning away, 'while I get Castellan Studlock.'

As the foreman waded away through the dust – watched with longing by the ox beside the rubble heap – Leff turned on Scorch. 'Studlock?'

Scorch shrugged helplessly. 'I ain't never heard of him.

Why, have you?'

'No. Of course not. I'd have remembered.'

'Why?'

'Why? Are you a Hood-damned idiot?'

'What are we doing here, Leff?'

'Torvald said no, remember? To everything. He's too good for us now. So we'll show him. We'll get hired on this fancy estate. As guards. With uniforms and polished buckles and those braided peace-straps for our swords. And so he'll curse himself that he didn't want us no more, as partners or anything. It's his wife, I bet – she never liked us at all, especially you, Scorch, so that's what you've done to us and I won't forget any time soon neither so don't even think otherwise.'

He shut his mouth then and stood at attention since the foreman was returning and at his side pitter-pattered a figure so wrapped up in swaddles of cotton it took three steps for every pendulum pitch forward from the foreman.

The feet beneath the ragged hem were small enough to be cloven hoofs. A hood covered the castellan's head and in the shadow of the hood's broad mouth there was something that might have been a mask. Gloved hands were drawn up in a way that reminded Leff – and, a moment later, Scorch – of a praying mantis, and if this was the estate castellan then someone had knocked the world askew in ways unimaginable to either Leff or Scorch.

The foreman said, 'Here they are, sir.'

Were there eyes in the holes of that smooth mask? Who could tell? But the head shifted and something told both men – like spider legs dancing up their spines – that they were under scrutiny.

'So true,' Castellan Studlock said in a voice that made Leff think of gravel under the fingernails while Scorch thought about the way there was always one gull that bullied all the rest and if the others just ganged up, why, equality and freedom would belong to everyone! 'So true,' said the swaddled, masked man (or woman, but then the foreman had said 'sir', hadn't he), 'there is need for estate guards. The Mistress will be arriving today, in fact, from the out-country. Proper presentation is desired.' The castellan paused and then leaned forward from the waist and Leff saw the red glint of unhuman eyes in the holes of the mask. 'You, what is your name?'

'Leff Bahan, sir, is my name.'

'You have been eating raw lake conch?'

'What? Er, not recently.'

A wrapped finger darted upward and wagged slowly back and forth. 'Risky. Please, open your mouth and stick out your tongue.'

'What? Er, like this?'

'That is fine, very fine, yes. So.' The castellan leaned back. 'Greva worms. You are infected. Pustules on your tongue. Dripping sinuses, yes? Itchy eyelids – the eggs do that, and when they hatch, why, the worms will crawl out from the corners of your eyes. Raw lake conch, tsk tsk.'

Leff clawed at his face. 'Gods, I need a healer! I gotta go—'

'No need. I will happily see your ailment treated – you must be presentable to the Mistress, yes, each standing at attention on either side of the gate. Well attired, hale of complexion and parasite-free. A small barracks is being readied. It will be necessary to hire at least three more to complete the requirements – do you have reliable friends capable of such work?'

'Er,' said Scorch when it was obvious that Leff had momentarily lost his facility for speech, 'we might. I could go and see . . .'

'Excellent, and your name is?'

'Scorch. Er, we got references—'

'No need. I am confident in my ability to judge character, and I have concluded that you two, while not to be considered vast of intellect, are nevertheless inclined to loyalty. This here will mark an advancement in your careers, I am sure, and so you will be diligent as befits your secret suspicion that you have exceeded your competence. All this is well. Also, I am pleased to note that you do not possess any parasites of a debilitating, unsightly sort. So, Scorch, go yonder and find us one, two or three additional guards. In the meantime, I will attend to Leff Bahan.'

'Right. Yes sir, I will do just that!'

The foreman was standing nearby, smirking. Neither Scorch nor a stunned Leff noticed this detail, and yes, they should have.

'A woman needs her secrets,' said Tiserra, lifting up an eggshell-thin porcelain cup and holding it in front of the bright sunlight. 'This one is good, darling. No flaws.' And the hag in the stall grinned, head bobbing.

Torvald Nom nodded happily, then licked his lips. 'Isn't this fun?' he said. 'Fine crockery to go into our new kitchen and the fancy oven on its four legs and all. Real drapes. Plush furniture, colourful rugs. We can get the storage shed rebuilt, too. Bigger, solid—' Tiserra set the cup down and moved directly in front of him. 'Husband.'

'Yes?'

'You're trying too hard.'

'I am? Well, it's like a dream, you see, being able to come back home. Do all these things for you, for us. It still doesn't feel real.'

'Oh, that's not the problem,' she said. 'You are already getting bored, Torvald Nom. You need more than just tagging along at my side. And the

coin won't last for ever – Beru knows I don't make enough for the both of us.'

'You're saying I need to get a job.'

'I will tell you a secret – just one, and keep in mind what I said earlier: we women have many secrets. I'm feeling generous today, so listen well. A woman is well pleased with a mate. He is her island, if you will, solid, secure. But sometimes she likes to swim offshore, out a way, floating facing the sun if you will. And she might even dive from sight, down to collect pretty shells and the like. And when she's done, why, she'll swim back to the island. The point is, husband, she doesn't want her mate's company when swimming. She needs only to know the island waits there.'

Torvald blinked, then frowned. 'You're telling me to get lost.'

'Leave me my traipsing through the market, darling. No doubt you have manly tasks to pursue, perhaps at a nearby tavern. I'll see you at home this evening.'

'If that's how you want it, then of course I will leave you to it, sweetness – and yes, I could do with a wander. A man has secrets, too!'

'Indeed.' And she smiled. 'Provided they're not the kind that, if I find out, I will have to hunt you down and kill you.'

He blanched. 'No, of course not! Nothing like that!'

'Good. See you later, then.'

And, being a brave man, a contented man (more or less), Torvald Nom happily fled his wife, as brave, contented men are wont to do the world over. *Need to plough that field behind the windbreak, love. Going to head out now and drop the nets. Better sand down that tabletop. Time to go out and rob somebody, sweetness.* Yes, men did as they did, just as women did as *they* did – mysterious and inexplicable as those doings might be.

And, so thinking, it was not long before Torvald Nom found himself walking into the Phoenix Inn. A man looking for work in all the wrong places.

Scorch arrived a short time later, pride and panic warring in his face, and my, how that pride blazed as he strutted up to where Torvald Nom was sitting.

Back at the estate Castellan Studlock brought Leff into an annexe to one side of the main building, where after some rummaging in crates stuffed with straw the muffled figure found a small glass bottle and presented it to Leff.

'Two drops into each eye. Two more on to the tongue. Repeat two more times today and three times a day until the bottle is empty.'

'That will kill them worms in my head?'

'The Greva worms, yes. I cannot vouch for any others.'

'I got more worms in my head?'

'Who can say? Do your thoughts squirm?'

'Sometimes! Gods below!'

'Two possibilities,' Studlock said. 'Suspicion worms or guilt worms.'

Leff scowled. 'You saying it's worms cause those things? Guilt and suspicion? I ain't never heard anything like that.'

'Are you sometimes gnawed with doubt? Do notions take root in your mind? Do strange ideas slither into your head? Are you unaccountably frightened at the sight of a fisher's barbed hook?'

'Are you some kind of healer?'

'I am what one needs me to be. Now, let us find you a uniform.'

Torvald Nom was rehearsing what he would tell his wife. Carefully weighing each word, trying out in his mind the necessary nonchalance required to deftly avoid certain details of his newfound employment.

'It's great that we're all working together again,' Scorch said, ambling happily at his side. 'As estate guards, no less! No more strong-arm work for

smelly criminals. No more hunting down losers to please some vicious piranha. No more—'

'Did this castellan mention the wages?'

'Huh? No, but it's bound to be good. Must be. It's demanding work—'

'Scorch, it may be lots of things, but "demanding" isn't one of them. We're there to keep thieves out. And since all three of us have been thieves ourselves at one time or another, we should be pretty damned good at it. We'd better be, or we'll get fired.'

'We need two more people. He wanted three more and all I got was you. So, two more. Can you think of anybody?'

'No. What family?'

'What?'

'This Mistress – what House does she belong to?'

'Don't know.'

'What's her name?'

'No idea.'

'She's from the countryside?'

'Think so.'

'Well, has any noble died recently that might have pulled her in? Inheritance, I mean?'

'How should I know? You think I bother keeping track of who's dead in that crowd? They ain't nothing to me, is my point.'

'We should've asked Kruppe – he'd know.'

'Well we didn't and it don't matter at all. We got us legitimate work, the three of us. We're on our way to being, well, legitimate. So just stop questioning everything, Tor! You're going to ruin it!' 'How can a few reasonable questions ruin anything?'

'It just makes me nervous,' Scorch replied. 'Oh, by the way, you can't see the castellan.'

'Why? Who else would I talk to about getting hired?'

'No, that's not what I mean. I mean you can't see him. All wrapped up in rags. With a hood, and gloves, and a mask. That's what I mean. His name is Studlock.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Why not? That's his name.'

'The castellan is bundled like a corpse and you don't find that somewhat unusual?'

'Could be afraid of the sun or something. No reason to be suspicious. You never met any strange people in your day, Tor?'

And Torvald Nom glanced across at Scorch, and found he had no reply to that at all.

'I see you have found another candidate,' Studlock said. 'Excellent. And yes, he will do nicely. Perhaps as the Captain of the House Guard?'

Torvald started. 'I haven't said a word yet and already I'm promoted?'

'Comparative exercise yields confidence in this assessment. Your name is?'

'Torvald Nom.'

'Of House Nom. Might this not prove a conflict of interest?'

'Might it? Why?'

'The Mistress is about to assume the vacant seat on the Council.'

'Oh. Well, I have virtually no standing in the affairs of House Nom. There are scores of us in the city, of course, with ties stretching everywhere, including off-continent. I, however, am not involved in any of that.'

'Were you cast out?'

'No, nothing so, er, extreme. It was more a question of . . . interests.'

'You lack ambition.'

'Precisely.'

'That is a fine manicure, Torvald Nom.'

'Er, thank you. I could recommend . . .' but that notion dwindled into a painful silence and Torvald tried hard not to glance down at the castellan's bandaged fingers.

At this moment Leff appeared from round the other side of the main house. His lips and his eyes were bright orange.

Scorch grunted. 'Hey, Leff. Remember that cat you sat on in that bar once?'

'What of it?'

'Nothing. Was just reminded, the way its eyes went all bulgy and crazed.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing. Was just reminded, is all. Look, I brought Tor.'

'I see that,' snarled Leff. 'I can see just fine, thank you.'

'What's wrong with your eyes?' Torvald Nom asked.

'Tincture,' said Leff. 'I got me a case of Greva worms.'

Torvald Nom frowned. 'Humans can't get Greva worms. Fish get Greva worms, from eating infected conch.'

Leff's bulging orange eyes bulged even more. Then he spun to face the castellan.

Who shrugged and said, 'Jurben worms?'

Torvald Nom snorted. 'The ones that live in the caverns below? In pockets of green gas? They're as long as a man's leg and nearly as thick.'

The castellan sighed. 'The spectre of misdiagnosis haunts us all. I do apologize, Leff. Perhaps your ailments are due to some other malady. No matter, the drops will wash out in a month or two.'

'I'm gonna have squished cat eyes for another month?'

'Preferable to Greva worms, I should think. Now, gentlemen, let us find the house clothier. Something black and brocaded in gold thread, I should imagine. House colours and all that. And then, a brief summary of your duties, shifts, days off and the like.'

'Would that summary include wages?' Torvald Nom asked.

'Naturally. As captain you will be paid twenty silver councils per week, Torvald Nom. Scorch and Leff, as guards, at fifteen. Acceptable?'

All three quickly nodded.

He felt slightly shaky on his feet, but Murillio knew that had nothing to do with any residue of weakness left by his wound. This weakness belonged to his spirit. As if age had sprung on to his back with claws digging into every joint and now hung there, growing heavier by the moment. He walked hunched at the shoulders and this seemed to have arrived like a new habit, or perhaps it was always there and only now, in his extremity, had he become aware of it.

That drunken pup's sword thrust had pierced something vital indeed, and no Malazan healer or any other kind of healer could mend it.

He tried forcing confidence into his stride as he made his way down the crowded street, but it was not an easy task. *Half drunk. Breeches at my ankles. Worthwhile excuses for what happened that night. The widow Sepharla spitting venom once she sobered up enough to realize what had happened, and spitting it still, it seems. What had happened, yes. With her daughter. Oh, not rape – too much triumph in the girl's eyes for that, though her face glowed with delight at her escort's charge to defend her honour. Once the shock wore off. I should never have gone back to explain—*

But that was yesterday's nightmare, all those sparks raining down on the domestic scene with its airs of concern, every cagey word painting over the

cracks in savage, short jabs of the brush. What had he expected? What had he gone there to find? Reassurance?

*Maybe. I guess I arrived with my own brush.*

Years ago, he would have smoothed everything over, almost effortlessly. A murmur here, a meeting of gazes there. Soft touch with one hand, the barest hint of pressure. Then again, years ago, *it would never have happened in the first place. That drunken fool!*

Oh, he'd growled those three words often in his head. But did they refer to the young man with the sword, or to himself?

Arriving at the large duelling school, he made his way through the open gate and emerged into the bright sunlight of the training ground. A score of young, sweating, overweight students scraped about in the dust, wooden weapons clattering. Most, he saw at once, lacked the necessary aggression, the killer's instinct. They danced to avoid, prodding the stick points forward with lack of any commitment. Their footwork, he saw, was abysmal.

The class instructor was standing in the shade of a column in the colonnaded corridor just beyond. She was not even observing the mayhem in the compound, intent, it seemed, on some loose stitching or tear in one of her leather gauntlets.

Making his way along one side of the mob getting lost in clouds of white dust, Murillio approached the instructor. She noted him briefly then returned her attention to the gauntlet.

'Excuse me,' Murillio said as he arrived. 'Are you the duelling mistress?'

'I am.' She nodded without looking at the students, where a couple of fights had started for real. 'How am I doing so far?'

Murillio glanced over and studied the fracas for a moment. 'That depends,' he said.

She grunted. 'Good answer. What can I do for you? Do you have some grandson or daughter you want thrown in there? Your clothes were expensive . . . once. As it looks, I doubt you can afford this school, unless of

course you're one of those stinking rich who make a point of dressing all threadbare. Old money and all that.'

'Quite a sales pitch,' Murillio observed. 'Does it actually work?'

'Classes are full. There's a waiting list.'

'I was wondering if you need help. With basic instruction.'

'What school trained you then?'

'Carpala.'

She snorted. 'He took one student every three years.'

'Yes.'

And now she looked at him with an intensity he'd not seen before. 'Last I heard, there were seven students of his left in the city.'

'Five, actually. Fedel tumbled down a flight of stairs and broke his neck. He was drunk. Santbala—'

'Was stabbed through the heart by Gorlas Vidikas – the brat's first serious victory.'

Murillio grimaced. 'Not much of a duel. Santbala had gone mostly blind but was too proud to admit it. A cut on the wrist would have given Gorlas his triumph.'

'The young ones prefer killing to wounding.'

'It's what duelling has come to, yes. Fortunately, most of your students here are more likely to stab themselves than any opponent they might one day face, and such wounds are rarely fatal.'

'Your name?'

'Murillio.'

She nodded as if she'd already guessed. 'And you're here because you want to teach. If you'd taken up teaching when Carpala was still alive—'

'He would have hunted me down and killed me, yes. He despised schools. In fact, he despised duelling. He once said teaching the rapier was like putting a poisonous snake into a child's hand. He drew no pleasure from instruction and was not at all surprised when very nearly every one of his prize students either got themselves killed or wasted away as drunkards or worse.'

'You did neither.'

'No, that's true. I chased women.'

'Only now they're too fast for you?'

'Something like that.'

'I am Stonny Menackis. This school exists to make me rich, and yes, it's working. Tell me, will you be sharing your old master's hatred of teaching?'

'Not as vehemently, I imagine. I don't expect to take any pleasure in it, but I will do what's needed.'

'Footwork.'

He nodded. 'Footwork. The art of running away. And forms, the defensive cage, since that will keep them alive.

Stop-hits to the wrist, knee, foot.'

'Non-lethal.'

'Yes.'

She sighed and straightened. 'All right. Assuming I can afford you.'

'I'm sure you can.'

She shot him a quizzical glance, and then added, 'Don't think about chasing me, by the way.'

'I am finished with all that, or, rather, it's finished with me.'

'Good—'

At this moment they both noticed that a woman had come up to them.

Stonny's voice was suddenly . . . different, as she said, 'Myrla. What are you doing here?'

'I've been looking for Gruntle—'

'That fool went off with the Trygalle – I warned him and now he's going to get himself killed for no good reason!'

'Oh. It's Harllo, you see . . .'

'What about him?'

The woman was flinching at everything Stonny said and Murillio suspected he would have done the same in the face of such a tone. 'He's gone missing.'

'What? For how long?'

'Snell said he saw him, two days back. Down at the docks. He's never not come home at day's end – he's only five—'

'Two days!'

Murillio saw that Stonny's face had gone white as death and a sudden terror was growing in her eyes. *'Two days!'*

'Snell says—'

'You stupid woman – Snell is a liar! A damned thief!'

Myrla stepped back under the onslaught. 'He gave us the coin you brought —'

'After I nearly had to strangle him, yes! What's Snell done to Harllo*? What's he done?'*

Myrla was weeping now, wringing her chapped hands. 'Said he done nothing, Stonny—'

'A moment,' cut in Murillio, physically stepping between the two women as he saw Stonny about to move forward, gloved hand lifting. 'A child's gone missing? I can put out the word – I know all sorts of people. Please, we can do this logically – down at the docks, you said? We'll need to find

out which ships left harbour in the last two days – the trading season's only just starting, so there shouldn't be many. His name is Harllo, and he's five years old—' *Gods below, you send him out into the streets and he's only five?* 'Can you give me a description? Hair, eyes, the like.'

Myrla was nodding, even as tears streamed down her lined cheeks and her entire body trembled. She nodded and kept on nodding.

Stonny spun round and rushed away, boots echoing harshly down the corridor.

Murillio stared after her in astonishment. 'Where – what?'

'It's her son, you see,' said Myrla between sobs. 'Her only son, only she don't want him and so he's with us but Snell, he has bad thoughts and does bad things sometimes only not this, never this bad, he wouldn't do anything this bad to Harllo, he wouldn't!'

'We'll find him,' said Murillio. *One way or the other, Lady's pull bless us, and bless the lad.* 'Now, please, describe him and describe him well – what he normally does each day – I need to know that, too. Everything you can tell me, Myrla. Everything.'

Snell understood, in a dim but accurate way, how others, wishing only the best in him, could have their faith abused at will, and even should some truth be dragged into the light, well, it was then a matter of displaying crushed self-pity, and the great defender would take him into her arms – as mothers do.

Can we hope that on rare occasions, perhaps late at night when the terrors crept close, he would think about how things he'd done could damage his mother's faith, and not just in him, but in herself as well? The son, after all, is but an extension of the mother – at least so the mother believed, there in some inarticulate part of her soul, unseen yet solid as an iron chain. Assail the child and so too the mother is assailed, for what is challenged is her life as a mother, the lessons she taught or didn't teach, the things she chose not to see, to explain away, to pretend were otherwise than what they were.

Weep for the mother. Snell won't and he never would, saving all his future to weep exclusively for himself. The creeping terrors awakened startling glimmers of thought, of near-empathy, but they never went so far as to lead to any self-recognition, or compassion for the mother who loved him unconditionally. His nature was the kind that took whatever was given to him as if it was a birthright, all of it, for ever and ever more.

Rage at injustice came when something – anything – was withheld. Things he righteously deserved, and of course he deserved everything he wanted. All that he wanted he reached for, and oh such fury if those things eluded his grasp or were then taken away!

In the absence of what might be imposed, a child will fashion the structure of the world to suit itself. Created from a mind barely awake – and clearly not even that when it came to introspection – that world becomes a strange place indeed. But let us not rail at the failings of nearby adults tied by blood or whatever. Some children are born in a cage – it's already there, in their skulls – and it's a dark cage.

He was wandering the streets, fleeing all the cruel questions being flung at him. They had no right to accuse him like that. Oh, when he was all grown up, nobody would be allowed to get after him like this. He'd break their faces. He'd step on their heads. He'd make them afraid, every one of them, so he could go on doing whatever he liked. He couldn't wait to get older and that was the truth.

And yet, he found himself heading for Two-Ox Gate. He needed to know, after all. Was Harllo still lying there? He hadn't hit him so hard, had he? Enough to kill him? Only if Harllo had been born weak, only if something was wrong with him from the start. And that wouldn't be a surprise, would it? Harllo's own mother had thrown him away, after all. So, if Harllo was lying dead in the grasses on that hilltop, why, it wasn't Snell's fault, was it? Something would have killed him sooner or later.

So that was a relief, but he'd better go and find out for sure. What if Harllo hadn't died at all? What if he was out there somewhere, planning murder? He could be spying on Snell right now! With a knife he'd found, or

a knotted stick. Quick, cunning, able to dart out of sight no matter how fast Snell spun round on the street – he was out there! Waiting, stalking.

Snell needed to prove things, and that was why he was running through Maiten, where the stink of Brownrun Bay and the lepers was nearly enough to make him retch – and hah! Listen to them scream when struck by the bigger stones he threw at them! He was tempted to tarry for a time, to find one of the uglier ones he could stone again and again until the cries just went away, and wouldn't that be a mercy? Better than rotting away.

But no, not yet, maybe on the way back, after he'd stood for a time, looking down at the flyblown corpse of Harllo – that would be the perfect conclusion to this day, after all. His problems solved. Nobody hunting him in the shadows. He'd throw stones fast and hard then, a human catapult – *smack!* Crush the flimsy skull!

Maybe he wasn't grown up yet, but he could still do things. *He could take lives.*

He left the road, made his way up the hill. This was the place all right – how could he forget? Every detail was burned into his brain. The first giant tapestry in the history of Snell. *Slaying his evil rival, and see the dragons wheeling in the sky above the lake – witnesses!*

The slope unaccountably tired him, brought a tremble to his legs. Just nervousness, of course. His shins stung as he rushed through the grasses, and came to the place.

No body.

Sudden terror. Snell looked round, on all sides – he was out there! Wasn't hurt at all! He'd probably faked the whole thing, biting down on his pain with every kick. Hiding, yes, just to get Snell in trouble and when Gruntle came back there'd be Hood to pay! Gruntle who made Harllo his favourite because Harllo did things to help out but wasn't it Snell who brought back that last sack of fuel? It was! Of course Gruntle wasn't there to see that, was he? So he didn't know anything because if he did—

*If he did he'd kill me.*

Cold, shivering in the lake wind, Snell ran back down the hill. He needed to get home, maybe not right home, but somewhere close – so he could jump Harllo when he showed up to tell his lies about what had happened. Lies – Snell had no bag of coins, did he? Harllo's mother's coins, hah, wasn't that funny? She was rich enough anyway and Snell deserved that money as much as anyone else – he reached up and tenderly touched the swelling on his left cheek. The bitch had hit him, all to steal back the money. Well, she'd pay one day, yes, she would.

One day, yes, he'd be all grown up. And then . . . *look out!*

It had taken the death of a once-famous duellist before people started treating Gorlas Vidikas as an adult, but now he was a man indeed, a feared one, a member of the Council. He was wealthy but not yet disgustingly rich, although that was only a matter of time.

Fools the world over worshipped gods and goddesses. But coin was the only thing worth worshipping, because to worship it was to see it grow – more and ever more – and all that he took for himself he took from someone else and this was where the real conquest happened. Day by day, deal by deal, and winning these games was proof of true faith and worship, and oh how deliciously satisfying.

Fools dropped coins into collection bowls. The rich cleaned those bowls out and this was the true division of humanity. But more than that: the rich decided how many coins the fools had to spare and how did that rate as power? Which side was preferable? As if the question needed asking.

Coin purchased power, like a god blessing the devout, but of both power and wealth there could never be enough. As for the victims, well, there could never be enough of them either. Someone was needed to clean the streets of the Estate District. Someone was needed to wash clothes, bedding and the like. Someone was needed to make the damned things in the first place! And someone was needed to fight the wars when the rich decided they wanted still more of whatever was out there.

Gorlas Vidikas, born to wealth and bred to title, found life to be good. But it could be better still and the steps to improvement were simple enough.

'Darling wife,' he now said as she was rising to leave, 'I must take a trip and will not return until tomorrow or even the day after.'

She paused, watching in a distracted way as the servants closed in to collect the dishes from the late breakfast – calloused hands darting in like featherless birds – and said, 'Oh?'

'Yes. I have been granted the overseer title of an operation out of the city, and I must visit the workings. Thereafter, I must take ship to Gredfallan Annexe to finalize a contract.'

'Very well, husband.'

'There was no advance notice of any of this,' Gorlas added, 'and, alas, I had extended invitations to both Shardan and Hanut to dine with us this evening.' He paused to smile at her. 'I leave them in your capable hands – please do extend my apologies.'

She was staring down at him in a somewhat disconcerting way. 'You wish me to host your two friends tonight?'

'Of course.'

'I see.'

And perhaps she did at that – yet was she railing at him? No. And was there perhaps the flush of excitement on her cheeks now? But she was turning away so he could not be sure. And walking, hips swaying in that admirable way of hers, right out of the room.

And there, what was done . . . was done.

He rose and gestured to his manservant. 'Make ready the carriage, I am leaving immediately.'

Head bobbing, the man hurried off.

Someone was needed to groom the horses, to check the tack, to keep the carriage clean and the brakes in working order. Someone was needed to ensure he had all he required in the travel trunks. And, as it happened, someone was needed for other things besides. Like spreading the legs as a

reward for past favours, and as a future debt when it was time to turn everything round.

They could take his wife. He would take them, one day – everything they owned, everything they dreamed of owning. After tonight, he would own one of them or both of them – both for certain in the weeks to come. Which one would produce Gorlas's heir? He didn't care – Challice's getting pregnant would get his parents off his back at the very least, and might well add the reward of satisfying her – and so wiping that faint misery from her face and bringing an end to all those irritating sighs and longing faraway looks out of the windows.

Besides, she worshipped money too. Hood knew she spent enough of it, on precious trinkets and useless indulgences. Give her a child and then three or four more and she'd be no further trouble and content besides.

Sacrifices needed to be made. *So make it, wife, and who knows you might even be smiling when it's done with.*

A bell and a half later the Vidikas carriage was finally clearing Two-Ox Gate and the horses picked up their pace as the road opened out, cutting through the misery of Maiten (and where else should the lost and the hopeless go but outside the city walls?) which Gorlas suffered with closed shutters and a scent ball held to his nose.

When he ruled he'd order a massive pit dug out on the Dwelling Plain and they would drag all these wasted creatures out there and bury the lot of them. It was simple enough – can't pay for a healer and that's just too bad, but look, we won't charge for the burial.

Luxuriating in such thoughts, and other civic improvements, Gorlas dozed as the carriage rumbled onward.

Challice stood alone in her private chambers, staring at the hemisphere of glass with its trapped moon. What would she lose? Her reputation. Or, rather, that reputation would change. Hanut grinning, Shardan strutting in that knowing way of his, making sure his secret oozed from every pore so that it was anything but a secret. Other men would come to her, expecting pretty much the same. And maybe, by then, there would be no stopping her.

And maybe, before too long, she'd find one man who decided that what he felt was love, and she would then begin to unveil her plan – the only plan she had and it certainly made sense. Eminently logical, even reasonable. Justifiable.

Sometimes the beast on its chain turns on its master. Sometimes it goes for his throat, and sometimes it gets there.

But it would take time. Neither Shardan Lim nor Hanut Orr would do – both needed Gorlas even though their triumvirate was a partnership of convenience. Any one of them would turn on the other if the situation presented itself – but not yet, not for a long while, she suspected.

Could she do this?

*What is my life? Here, look around – what is it?* She had no answer to that question. She was like a jeweller blind to the notion of value. Shiny or dull, it didn't matter. Rare or abundant, the only difference lay in desire and how could one weigh that, when the need behind it was the same? The same, yes, in all its sordid hunger.

She could reduce all her needs to but one. She could do that. She would have to, to stomach what was to come.

She felt cold, could see the purple tracks through the pallid white skin of her arms as her blood flowed turgidly on. She needed to walk in sunlight, to feel the heat, and know that people would look upon her as she passed – on her fine cape of ermine with its borders of black silk sewn with silvered thread; on the bracelets on her wrists and down at her ankles – too much jewellery invited the thief's snatching hand, after all, and was crass besides. And her long hair would glisten with its scented oils, and there would be a certain look in her eyes, lazy, satiated, seductively sealed away so that it seemed she took notice of nothing and no one, and this was, she well knew, a most enticing look in what were still beautiful eyes—

She found herself looking into them, there in the mirror, still clear even after half a carafe of wine at breakfast and then the pipe of rustleaf afterwards, and she had a sudden sense that the next time she stood thus, the face staring back at her would belong to someone else, another woman

wearing her skin, her face. A stranger far more knowing, far wiser in the world's dismal ways than this one before her now.

Was she looking forward to making her acquaintance?

It was possible.

The day beckoned and she turned away – before she saw too much of the woman she was leaving behind – and set about dressing for the city.

'So, you're the historian who survived the Chain of Dogs.'

The old man sitting at the table looked up and frowned. 'Actually, I didn't.'

'Oh,' said Scillara, settling down into the chair opposite him – her body felt strange today, as if even fat could be weightless. Granted, she wasn't getting any heavier, but her bones were wearing plenty and there was a sense of fullness, of roundness, and for some reason all of this was making her feel sexually charged, very nearly brimming over with a slow, sultry indolence. She drew out her pipe and eyed the Malazan opposite. 'Well, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'It's a long story,' he said.

'Which you're relating to that ponytailed bard.'

He grunted. 'So much for privacy.'

'Sounds to be a good thing, getting it all out. When he found out I was in Sha'ik's camp in Raraku, he thought to cajole details out of me. But I was barely conscious most of that time, so I wasn't much help. I told him about Heboric, though.'

And Duiker slowly straightened, a sudden glint in his eyes burning away all the sadness, all the weariness. 'Heboric?'

Scillara smiled. 'Fisher said you might be interested in that.'

'I am. Or,' he hesitated, 'I think I am.'

'He died, I'm afraid. But I will tell you of it, if you'd like. From the night we fled Sha'ik.'

The light had dimmed in Duiker's eyes and he looked away. 'Hood seems determined to leave me the last one standing. All my friends . . .'

'Old friends, maybe,' she said, pulling flame into the bowl. 'Plenty of room for new ones.'

'That's a bitter consolation.'

'We need to walk, I think.'

'I'm not in the mood—' 'But I am and Barathol is gone and your partners are upstairs chewing on conspiracies. Chaur is in the kitchen eating everything in sight and Blend's fallen in love with me and sure, that's amusing and even enjoyable for a time, but for me it's not the real thing. Only she's not listening.

Anyway, I want an escort and you're elected.'

'Really, Scillara—'

'Being old doesn't mean you can be rude. I want you to take me to the Phoenix Inn.'

He stared at her for a long moment.

She drew hard on her pipe, swelled her lungs to thrust her ample breasts out and saw how his gaze dropped a fraction or two. 'I'm looking to embarrass a friend, you see,' she said, then released the lungful of smoke towards the black-stained rafters.

'Well,' he sourly drawled, 'in that case . . .'

'Rallick's furious,' Cutter said as he sat down, reaching for the brick of cheese to break off a sizeable chunk which he held in his left hand, an apple in his right. A bite from the apple was quickly followed by one from the cheese.

'Kruppe commiserates. Tragedy of destiny, when destiny is that which one chooses given what one is given. Dear Cutter might have retained original name had he elected a life in, say, Murillio's shadow. Alas, Cutter in name is cutter in deed.'

Cutter swallowed and said, 'Hold on. I wasn't making a point of walking in Rallick's shadow. Not anybody's shadow – in fact, the whole idea of "shadow" makes me sick. If one god out there has truly cursed me, it's Shadowthrone.'

'Shifty Shadowthrone, he of the sourceless shade, a most conniving, dastardly god indeed! Chill is his shadow, cruel and uncomfortable is his throne, horrid his Hounds, tangled his Rope, sweet and seductive his innocent servants! But!' And Kruppe held aloft one plump finger. 'Cutter would not speak of walking in shadows, why, not anyone's! Even one which sways most swayingly, that cleaves most cleavingly, that flutters in fluttering eyelashes framing depthless dark eyes that are not eyes at all, but pools of unfathomable depth – and is she sorry? By Apsalar she is not!'

'I hate you sometimes,' Cutter said in a grumble, eyes on the table, cheese and apple temporarily forgotten in his hands.

'Poor Cutter. See his heart carved loose from yon chest, flopping down like so much bloodied meat on this tabletop. Kruppe sighs and sighs again in the deep of sympathy and extends, yes, this warm cloak of companionship against the cold harsh light of truth this day and on every other day! Now, kindly pour us more of this herbal concoction which, whilst tasting somewhat reminiscent of the straw and mud used to make bricks, is assured by Meese to aid in all matters of digestion, including bad news.'

Cutter poured, and then took another two bites, apple and cheese. He chewed for a time, then scowled. 'What bad news?'

'That which is yet to arrive, of course. Will honey aid this digestive aid? Probably not. It will, one suspects, curdle and recoil. Why is it, Kruppe wonders, that those who claim all healthy amends via rank brews, gritty grey repasts of the raw and unrefined, and unpalatable potions, and this amidst a regime of activities invented solely to erode bone and wear out muscle – all these purveyors of the pure and good life are revealed one and all as wan, parched well nigh bloodless, with vast fists bobbing up and down in the throat and watery eyes savage in righteous smugitude, walking like energized storks and urinating water pure enough to drink all over

again? And pass if you please to dear beatific Kruppe, then, that last pastry squatting forlorn and alone on yon pewter plate.'

Cutter blinked. 'Sorry. Pass what?'

'Pastry, dear lad! Sweet pleasures to confound the pious worshippers of suffering! How many lives do each of us have, Kruppe wonders rhetorically, to so constrain this one with desultory disciplines so efficacious that Hood himself must bend over convulsed in laughter? This evening, dear friend of Kruppe, you and I will walk the cemetery and wager which buried bones belong to the healthy ones and which to the wild cavorting headlong maniacs who danced bright with smiles each and every day!'

'The healthy bones would be the ones left by old people, I'd wager.'

'No doubt no doubt, friend Cutter, a most stolid truth. Why, Kruppe daily encounters ancient folk and delights in their wide smiles and cheery well-mets.'

'They're not all miserable, Kruppe.'

'True, here and there totters a wide-eyed one, wide-eyed because a life of raucous abandon is behind one and the fool went and survived it all! Now what, this creature wonders? Why am I not dead? And you, with your three paltry decades of pristine boredom, why don't you just go somewhere and die!'

'Are you being hounded by the aged, Kruppe?'

'Worse. Dear Murillio moans crabby and toothless and now ponders a life of inactivity. Promise Kruppe this, dear Cutter – when you see this beaming paragon here before you falter, dribble at the mouth, mutter at the clouds, wheeze and fart and trickle and all the rest, do bundle Kruppe up tight in some thick impervious sack of burlap, find a nearby cliff and send him sailing out! Through the air! Down on to the thrashing seas and crashing rocks and filmy foams – Kruppe implores you! And listen, whilst you do so, friend Cutter, sing and laugh, spit into my wake! Do you so promise?'

'If I'm around, Kruppe, I'll do precisely as you ask.'

'Kruppe is relieved, so relieved. Aaii, last pastry revolts in nether gut – more of this tea, then, to yield the bitumen belch of tasteless misery on earth. And then, shortly anon, it will be time for lunch! And see who enters, why, none other than Murillio, newly employed and flush and so eager with generosity!'

Iskaral Pust's love was pure and perfect, except that his wife kept getting in the way. When he leaned left she leaned right; when he leaned right she leaned left. When he stretched his neck she stretched hers and all he could see was the mangled net of her tangled hair and beneath that those steely black eyes too knowing for her own good and for his, too, come to that.

'The foolish hag,' he muttered. 'Can't she see I'm leaning this way and that and bobbing up and down only because I feel like it and not because the High Priestess is over there amply presenting her deliciously ample backside – knowing well, yes she does, how I squirm and drool, pant and palpitate, the temptress, the wilful vixen! But no! Every angle and this horrid nemesis heaves into view, damning my eyes! Maybe I can cleverly send her off on an errand, now there's an idea.' He smiled and leaned forward, all the armour of his charm trembling and creaking in the face of the onslaught of her baleful stare. 'Sweet raisin crumpet, the mule needs grooming and tender care in the temple stables.'

'Does it now?'

'Yes. And since you're clearly not busy with anything at the moment, you could instead do something useful.'

'But I am doing something useful, dearest husband.'

'Oh, and what's that, tender trollop?'

'Why, I am sacrificing my time to keep you from making a bigger fool of yourself than is normal, which is quite a challenge, I assure you.'

'What stupidity is she talking about? Love oyster, whatever are you talking about?'

'She's made her concession that you are who you claim to be. And that's the only thing keeping her from tossing us both out on our scrawny behinds.

You and me and the mule and the gibbering bhokarala – assuming she can ever manage to get them out of the cellar. I'm a witch of the spider goddess and the High Priestess back there is not at all happy about that. So I'm telling you, O rotted apple of my eye, if I let you try and jump her we're all done for.'

'She talks so much it's a wonder her teeth don't fall out. But wait! Most of them already have! Shh, don't laugh, don't even smile. Am I smiling? Maybe, but it's the indulgent kind, the kind that means well or if not well then nothing at all though wives the world over, when seeing it, go into apoplectic rage for no good reason at all, the cute, loveable dearies.' He sighed and leaned back, trying to peer under her right armpit, but the peripheral vision thing turned that into a hairy nightmare. Flinching, he sighed again and rubbed at his eyes. 'Go on, wife, the mule is pining and your sweet face is all he longs for – to kick! Hee hee! Shh, don't laugh! Don't even smile!' He looked up. 'Delicious wrinkled date, why not take a walk, out into the sunshine in the streets? The gutters, more like, hah! The runnels of runny sewage – take a bath! Piss up one of those lamp posts and not a dog in Darujhistan would dare the challenge! Hah! But this smile is the caring kind, yes, see?'

The High Priestess Sordiko Qualm cavorted up to where they sat – this woman didn't walk, she went as much sideways as forward, a snake of seduction, an enchantress of nonchalance; gods, a man could die just watching! Was that a whimper escaping him? Of course not, more likely Mogora's armpit coming up for air made that gasping, squelching sound.

'I would be most pleased,' the High Priestess said in that well-deep voice that purred like every temptation imaginable all blended into one steaming stew of invitation, 'if you two indulged in mutual suicide.'

'I could fake mine,' Iskaral Pust whispered. 'Then she'd be out of our way – I know, High Priestess of all my fantasies, I can see how you wage war against your natural desires, your blazing hunger to get your hands on me! Oh, I know I'm not as handsome as some people, but I have power!'

Sighing, Sordiko Qualm cavorted away – but no, from behind it was more a saunter. Approaching was a cavort, leaving was a saunter. 'Sordiko

Saunter Qualm Cavort, she comes and goes but never quite leaves, my love of loves, my better love than that excuse for love I once thought was real love but let's face it love it wasn't, not like this love. Why, this love is the big kind, the swollen kind, the towering kind, the rutting gasping pumping exploding kind! Oh, I hurt myself.'

Mogora snorted. 'You wouldn't know real love if it bit you in the face.'

'Keep that armpit away from me, woman!'

'You've turned this temple into a madhouse, Iskaral Pust. You turn every temple you live in into a madhouse! So here we are, contemplating mutual murder, and what does your god want from us? Why, nothing! Nothing but waiting, always waiting! Bah, I'm going shopping!'

'At last!' Iskaral crowed.

'And you're coming with me, to carry my purchases.'

'Not a chance. Use the mule.'

'Stand up or I'll have my way with you right here.'

'In the holy vestry? Are you insane?'

'Rutting blasphemy. Will Shadowthrone be pleased?'

'Fine! Shopping, then. Only no leash this time.'

'Then don't get lost.'

'I wasn't lost, you water buffalo, I was escaping.'

'I'd better get the leash again.'

'And I'll get my knife!'

Oh, how marriage got in the way of love! The bonds of mutual contempt drawn tight until the victims squeal, but is it in pain or pleasure? Is there a difference? But that is a question not to be asked of married folk, oh no.

And in the stables the mule winks at the horse and the horse feels breakfast twisting in her gut and the flies, well, they fly from one lump of

dung to another, convinced that each is different from the last, fickle creatures that they are, and there is no wisdom among the fickle, only longing and frustration, and the buzz invites the next dubious conquest smelling so fragrant in the damp straw.

Buzz buzz.

Amidst masses of granite and feverish folds of bedrock veined with glittering streaks, the mining operation owned by Humble Measure was an enormous pit facing a cliff gouged with caves and tunnels. Situated equidistant between Darujhistan and Gredfallan Annexe and linked by solid raised roads, the mine and its town-sized settlement had a population of eight hundred. Indentured workers, slaves, prisoners, work chiefs, security guards, cooks, carpenters, potters, rope makers, clothes makers and menders, charcoal makers, cutters and nurses, butchers and bakers – the enterprise seethed with activity. Smoke filled the air. Old women with bleeding hands clambered through the heaps of tailings collecting shreds of slag and low-quality chunks of coal. Gulls and crows danced round these rag-clad, hunched figures.

Not a single tree was left standing anywhere within half a league of the mine. Down on a slope on the lakeside was a humped cemetery in which sat a few hundred shallow graves. The water just offshore was lifeless and stained red, with a muddy bottom bright orange in colour.

Scented cloth held to his face, Gorlas Vidikas observed the operation which he now managed, although perhaps 'managed' was the wrong word. The day to day necessities were the responsibility of the camp workmaster, a scarred and pock-faced man in his fifties with decades-old scraps of raw metal still embedded in his hands. He hacked out a cough after every ten words or so, and spat thick yellow mucus down between his bronze-capped boots.

'The young 'uns go the fastest, of course.' *Cough, spit.* 'Our *moles* or so we call 'em, since they can squeeze inta cracks no grown-up can get through,' *cough, spit,* 'and this way if there's bad air it's none of our stronger workers get killed.' *Cough . . .* 'We was havin' trouble gettin' enough young 'uns for a time there, until we started buyin' 'em from the poorer fam'lies both in and

outa the city – they got too many runts t'feed, ye see? An' we got special rules for the young 'uns – nobody gets their hands on 'em, if you know what I mean.

'From them it goes on up. A miner lasts maybe five years, barring falls and the like. When they get too sick we move 'em outa the tunnels, make 'em shift captains. A few might get old enough for foreman – I was one of them, ye see. Got my hands dirty as a lad and 'ere I am and if that's not freedom I don't know what is, hey?'

This workmaster, Gorlas Vidikas silently predicted, would be dead inside three years. 'Any trouble with the prisoners?' he asked.

'Nah, most don't live long enough to cause trouble. We make 'em work the deadlier veins. It's the arsenic what kills 'em, mostly – we're pullin' gold out too, you know. Profit's gone up three thousand per cent in the past year. E'en my share I'm looking at maybe buying a small estate.'

Gorlas glanced across at this odious creature. 'You married?'

*Cough, spit.* 'Not yet,' and he grinned, 'but you know what a rich man can buy, hey?'

'As part of what I am sure will be an exceptional relationship,' Gorlas said, *where I profit from your work*, 'I am prepared to finance you on such an estate. A modest down payment on your part, at low interest . . .'

'Really? Why, noble sir, that would be fine. Yessy, very fine. We can do that all right.'

*And when you kick off with no heirs I acquire yet another property in the Estate District.* 'It is my pleasure,' he said with a smile. 'Those of us who have done well in our lives need to help each other whenever we can.'

'My thoughts too, 'bout all that. My thoughts exactly.'

Smoke and stenches, voices ringing through dust, oxen lowing as they strained with overloaded wagons. Gorlas Vidikas and the dying workmaster looked down on the scene, feeling very pleased with themselves.

Harllo squirmed his way out from the fissure, the hand holding the candle stretched out in front of him, and felt a calloused grip wrap round his narrow wrist. The candle was taken and then Bainisk was pulling Harllo out, surprisingly tender but that was Bainisk, a wise veteran all of sixteen years old, half his face a streak of shiny scar tissue through which peered the glittering blue of his eyes – both of which had miraculously escaped damage. He was grinning now as he helped Harllo on to his feet.

'Well, Mole?'

'Iron, raw and cold and wide across as three of my hands laid flat.'

'The air?'

'I'm here, aren't I?'

Laughing, Bainisk slapped him on the back. 'You've earned the afternoon. Back to Chuffs you go.'

Harllo frowned. 'Please, can't I stay on here?'

'Venaz giving you more trouble?'

'Bullies don't like me,' Harllo said.

'That's 'cause you're smart. Now listen, I warned him off once already and once is all the warning I give and he knows that so he won't be bothering you. We need our moles happy and in one piece. It's a camp law. I'm in charge of Chuffs, right?'

Harllo nodded. 'Only you won't be there, will you? Not this afternoon.'

'Venaz is in the kitchen today. It'll be all right.'

Nodding, Harllo collected his small sack of gear, which was a little heavier than usual, and set out for upside. He liked the tunnels, at least when the air wasn't foul and burning his throat. Surrounded by so much solid stone made him feel safe, protected, and he loved most those narrowest of cracks that only he could get through – or the few others like him, still fit with no broken bones and still small enough. He'd only cracked one finger so far and that was on his right hand which he used to hold the

candle and not much else. He could pull himself along with his left, his half-naked body slick with sweat despite the damp stone and the trickles of icy water.

Exploring places no one had ever seen before. Or dragging the thick snaking hoses down into the icy pools then calling out for the men on the pumps to get started, and in the candle's fitful flickering light he'd watch the water level descend and see, sometimes, the strange growths on the stone, and in the crevices the tiny blind fish that – if he could reach – he slid into his mouth and chewed and swallowed, so taking something of this underworld into himself, and, just like those fish, at times he didn't even need his eyes, only his probing fingers, the taste and smell of the air and stone, the echoes of water droplets and the click-click of the white roaches skittering away.

Earlier this morning he'd been sent down a crevasse, ropes tied to his ankles as he was lowered like a dead weight, down, down, three then four knots of rope, before his outstretched hands found warm, dry rock, and here, so far below ground, the air was hot and sulphurous and the candle when he lit it flared in a crossflow of sweet rich air.

In the yellow light he looked round and saw, sitting up against a wall of the crevasse not three paces away, a corpse. Desiccated, the face collapsed and the eye sockets shrunken holes. Both legs were shattered, clearly from a fall, the shards sticking through the leathery skin.

Furs drawn up like a blanket; and within reach of one motionless, skeletal hand was a rotted bag now split open, revealing two antler picks, a bone punch and a groundstone mallet. A miner, Harllo realized, just like him. A miner of long, long ago.

Another step closer, eyes on those wonderful tools which he'd like to take, and the corpse spoke.

'As you please, cub.'

Harllo lunged backward. His heart pounded wild in the cage of his chest. 'A demon!'

'Patron of miners, perhaps. Not a demon, cub, not a demon.'

The candle had gone out with Harllo's panicked retreat. The corpse's voice, sonorous, with a rhythm like waves on a sandy beach, echoed out from the pitch black darkness.

'I am Dev'ad Anan Tol, of the Irynthal Clan of the Imass, who once lived on the shores of the Jhagra Til until the Tyrant Raest came to enslave us. Sent us down into the rock, where we all died. Yet see, I did not die. Alone of all my kin, I did not die.'

Harllo shakily fumbled with the candle, forcing the oiled wick into the spring spark tube. Three quick hissing pumps of the sparker and flame darted up.

'Nice trick, that.'

'The tube's got blue gas, not much and runs out fast so it needs refilling. There's bladders upside. Why didn't you die?'

'I have had some time to ponder that question, cub. I have reached but one conclusion that explains my condition.

The Ritual of Tellann.'

'What made the evil T'lan Imass! I heard about that from Uncle Gruntle! Undead warriors at Black Coral – Gruntle saw them with his own eyes! And they kneeled and all their pain was taken from them by a man who then died since there was so much pain he took from them and so they built a barrow and it's still there and Gruntle said he wept but I don't believe that because Gruntle is big and the best warrior in the whole world and nothing could make him weep nothing at all!' And Harllo had to stop then so that he could regain his breath. And still his heart hammered like hailstones on a tin roof.

From the Imass named Dev'ad Anan Tol, silence.

'You still there?' Harllo asked.

'Cub. Take my tools. The first ever made and by my own hand. I was an inventor. In my mind ideas bred with such frenzy that I lived in a fever. At

times, at night, I went half mad. So many thoughts, so many notions – my clan feared me. The Bonecaster feared me. Raest himself feared me, and so he had me thrown down here. To die. And my ideas with me.'

'Should I tell everyone about you? They might decide to lift you out, so you can see the world again.'

'The world? That tiny flame you hold has shown me more of the world than I can comprehend. The sun . . . oh, the sun . . . that would destroy me, I think. To see it again.'

'We have metal picks now,' Harllo said. 'Iron.'

'Skystone. Yes, I saw much of it in the tunnels. The Jaghut used sorcery to bring it forth and shape it – we were not permitted to witness such things. But I thought, even then, how it might be drawn free, without magic. With heat. Drawn out, given shape, made into useful things. Does Raest still rule?'

'Never heard of any Raest,' said Harllo. 'Bainisk rules Chuffs and Workmaster rules the mine and in the city there's a council of nobles and in faraway lands there're kings and queens and emperors and empresses.'

'And T'lan Imass who kneel.'

Harllo glanced up the shaft – he could hear faint voices, echoing down. 'They want to pull me back up. What should I tell them about this place?'

'The wrong rock, the white grit that sickens people. Foul air.'

'So no one else comes down here.'

'Yes.'

'But then you'll be alone again.'

'Yes. Tell them, too, that a ghost haunts this place. Show them the ghost's magical tools.'

'I will. Listen, could be I might sneak back down here, if you like.'

'Cub, that would be most welcome.'

'Can I bring you anything?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Splints.'

And now Harllo was making his way back to daylight, and in his extra-heavy bag there clunked the tools of the corpse. Antler and bone hardened into stone, tines jabbing at his hip.

If Venaz found out about them he might take them, so Harllo knew he had to be careful. He had to hide them somewhere. Where nobody went or looked or picked through things. Plenty to think about, he had.

And he needed to find something called 'splints'. Whatever they were.

She insisted on taking his arm as they walked towards the Phoenix Inn, down from the Estate District, through Third Tier Wall, and into the Daru District. 'So many people,' she was saying. 'This is by far the biggest city I've ever been in. I think what strikes me is how many familiar faces I see – not people I actually know, just people who look like people I've known.'

Duiker thought about that, and then nodded. 'The world is like that, aye.'

'Is it now? Why?'

'I have no idea, Scillara.'

'Is this all the wisdom you can offer?'

'I even struggled with that one,' he replied.

'All right. Let's try something else. I take it you see no point in history.'

He grunted. 'If by that you mean that there is no progress, that even the notion of progress is a delusion, and that history is nothing more than a host of lessons nobody wants to pay attention to, then yes, there is no point. Not in writing it down, not in teaching it.'

'Never mind, then. You choose.'

'Choose what?'

'Something to talk about.'

'I don't think I can – nothing comes to mind, Scillara. Well, I suppose I'd like to know about Heboric.'

'He was losing his mind. We were trying to get to Otataral Island, where he wanted to give something back, something he once stole. But we never made it. Ambushed by T'lan Imass. They were going after him and the rest of us just got in the way. Me, Cutter, Greyfrog. Well, they also stole Felisin Younger – that seemed to be part of the plan, too.'

'Felisin Younger.'

'That's the name Sha'ik gave her.'

'Do you know why?'

She shook her head. 'I liked her, though.'

'Sha'ik?'

'Felisin Younger. I was training her to be just like me, so it's no wonder I liked her.' And she gave him a wide smile.

Duiker answered with a faint one of his own – hard indeed to be miserable around this woman. Better if he avoided her company in the future. 'Why the Phoenix Inn, Scillara?'

'As I said earlier, I want to embarrass someone. Cutter, in fact. I had to listen to him for months and months, about how wonderful Darujhistan is, and how he would show me this and that. Then as soon as we arrive he ducks away, wanting nothing to do with us. Back to his old friends, I suppose.'

She was being offhand, but Duiker sensed the underlying hurt. Perhaps she and Cutter had been more than just companions. 'Instead,' he said, 'you found us Malazans.'

'Oh, we could have done much worse.'

'Barathol had kin,' said Duiker. 'In the Bridgeburners. An assassin. Seeing your friend was like seeing a ghost. For Picker, Antsy . . . Blend. Bluepearl. The old marines.'

'One of those familiar faces belonging to someone you don't know.'

He smiled again. 'Yes.' *Oh, yes, Scillara, you are clever indeed.*

'And before you know it, some old marine healer is out doing whatever he can to help Barathol Mekhar. Only there's this history – the stuff that doesn't matter – with our blacksmith friend. Having to do with Aren and the—'

'Red Blades, aye.'

She shot him a look. 'You knew?'

'We all know. The poor bastard. Getting such a raw deal in his own homeland. Things like that, well, we can sympathize with, because we have our histories. The kind that can't be ignored because they've put us right where we are, right here, a continent away from our home.'

'Progress?'

'That remains to be seen. And here we are. Phoenix Inn.'

She stood studying the decrepit sign for a long moment. 'That's it? It's a dump.'

'If the story is accurate, Kalam Mekhar himself went in there once or twice. So did Sorry, who later took the name of Apsalar, and that was where young Crokus met her – who is now known as Cutter, right? Putting it all together isn't easy. Mallet was there for most of that. In there,' he added, 'you might even find a man named Kruppe.'

She snorted. 'Cutter talked about him. Some oily fence and ex-thief.'

'Ambassador at large during the Pannion War. The man who stood down Caladan Brood. Single-handedly confounding most of the great leaders on the continent.'

Her eyes had widened slightly. 'Really? All that? Cutter never mentioned any of that.'

'He wouldn't have known, Scillara. He went off with Fiddler, Kalam and Apsalar.'

'That's a tale I'm slowly putting together myself,' she said. 'Apsalar. The woman Cutter loves.'

*Ah.*

'Let's go, then.'

And they set out across the street.

'The kid's been snatched, is my guess,' Murillio concluded, settling back in his chair. 'I know, Kruppe, it's one of those things that just happens. Tanners grab children, trader ships, fishing crews, pimps and temples, they all do given the chance. So I know, there may not be much hope—'

'Nonsense, Murillio loyal friend of Kruppe. In appealing to this round self you have displayed utmost wisdom. Moreover, Kruppe applauds this new profession of yours. Instructor yes, in all fine points of fine pointiness – the art of duelling is writ bold in blood, yes? Bold too is this Stonny Menackis, old partner to none other than Gruntle of the Barbs, and was there not a third? A long-armed man who did not return from Capustan? And was his name not Harllo? Kruppe must plumb deeper depths of memory to be certain of such details, yet his instinct cries out *true!* And how can such a voice be denied?'

Cutter rubbed at the bristle on his chin. 'I could head back down to the ship I came in on, Murillio. Talk to the dock waifs and the old women under the piers.'

'I'd appreciate that, Cutter.'

'Kruppe suspects a whispery warming of heart in dear Murillio for his new employer – ah, does Kruppe flinch at vehement expostulation? Does he wince at savage denial? Why, the answer is no to both!'

'Leave off that, Kruppe,' Murillio said. 'The lad's her son.'

'Left in the care of others – is she so cold of heart, then? Do you rise to extraordinary challenge, mayhap? The best kind, of course, ever the best

kind.'

'There's a story there,' Murillio said. 'Not all women make good mothers, true enough. But she doesn't seem that kind. I mean, well, she struck me as someone with fierce loyalties. Maybe. Oh, I don't know. It'd be nice to find the runt, that's all.'

'We understand, Murillio,' Cutter said.

'Rely upon Kruppe, dearest friend. All truths will yield themselves in the fullness of revelatory revelation, anon. But wait, fortuitous reunion of another sort beckons,' and he leaned forward, small eyes fixing upon Cutter. Eyebrows waggled.

'You're scaring me—'

'Terror shall burgeon imminently for poor Cutter.'

'What are you—'

A hand settled on his shoulder, soft, plump.

Cutter closed his eyes and said, 'I've got to stop sitting with my back to the door.'

Murillio rose, suddenly formal as he bowed to someone standing behind Cutter. 'Historian. We have met once or—'

'I recall,' the man replied, moving round into Cutter's sight as he collected two chairs from a nearby table. *Thank the gods, not his hand.*

'Please do thank Mallet again—'

'I will,' the historian replied. 'In the meantime, I'm not the one who should be doing the introductions.' Those weary, ancient eyes fixed on Cutter. 'You're Cutter, yes?'

He twisted to look at the woman standing behind his chair. Seated as he was, his eyes were level with a pair of breasts covered in tight-fitting linen. And he knew them well. It was a struggle to lift his gaze higher. 'Scillara.'

'You call that an introduction?' she asked, dragging up the other chair the historian had pulled close. She wedged herself in on Cutter's right and sat down. 'I've never seen bones picked so clean on a plate before,' she observed, her eyes on the leavings of lunch.

Kruppe wheezed upright. He began waving his hands. 'Kruppe hastens with proper welcome to this grand company to already beloved Scillara of the Knowing Eyes and other assorted accoutrements of charm Kruppe would dearly wish to knowingly eye, if not for the dastardly demands of decorum. Welcome, cries Kruppe, even as he slumps back – *oof!* – exhausted by his enthusiasm and dimpled with desire.'

Murillio bowed to Scillara. 'I won't be as crass as dimpled Kruppe. I am Murillio, an old friend of Cro— Cutter's.'

She began repacking her pipe with rustleaf. 'Cutter spoke often of your charm, Murillio, when it comes to women,' and she paused to smile.

Murillio sat back down a tad hard and Cutter saw, wryly amused, that he looked more awake now than he had in days, perhaps since the stabbing.

Kruppe was fanning his flushed face. Then he raised a hand. 'Sulty! Sweet creature, the finest wine in the house! No, wait! Go down the street to the Peacock and buy us a bottle of *their* finest wine! The finest wine in their house, yes! Is something wrong, Meese? Kruppe meant no insult, honest! Sulty, be on with you, child! Meese, why—'

'No more,' cut in Murillio, 'unless you want to pile on ever more insults to our faithful proprietor, until she comes over here and kills you outright.'

'Dire misunderstanding! Enthusiasm and—' 'Dimples, we know.'

Cutter spoke up, 'Scillara was a camp follower in Sha'ik's rebel city in Raraku. Er, not a follower like that, I mean—' 'Yes I was,' she said. 'Just that.' She struck sparks to the bowl. 'Plaything to soldiers. In particular, Malazans. Renegades from Korbolo Dom's turncoat army. His Dogslayers. I was then plucked from what would have been a short, benumbed existence by a Malazan priest with no hands, who dragged me across half of Seven Cities, along with Cutter here.' She sent a stream of smoke upward, then

continued. 'Just inland of the Otataral Sea, we got jumped. The priest was cut down. Cutter got disembowelled and I had a baby – no real connection between the two, by the way, apart from bad timing. Some villagers found us and saved us – the son of Osserc showed up for that – and that's how we collected Barathol Mekhar and Chaur, making up for the two we'd lost in the ambush.

'Now, normally I don't tell long-winded tales like this one, but what I gave you was necessary for you to understand a few important things. One: I left the baby in the village, with no regrets. Two: Cutter, who was with us because The Rope thought Felisin Younger needed protecting, nearly died and is now living with a feeling of having failed at his task, since Felisin was taken from us. Three: Cutter also has a broken heart, and no matter how much fun we eventually had, him and me, it's clear that I can't help him with that. And finally, four: he's embarrassed by me because he probably thinks I'm too fat and he thinks you'll all be thinking the same thing, too.'

All three men facing her fervently shook their heads at that, while Cutter sat head in hands.

Sulty arrived to slam down a thick-based dusty clay bottle and two more goblets. 'Three councils, Kruppe!' Kruppe set three silver coins into her hand without a whimper.

After a long moment, the historian sighed, reached out and uncorked the bottle. He sniffed the mouth. Brows lifted. 'Empty the rubbish in your cups, please.'

They did and Duiker poured.

'Cutter,' said Murillio.

'What?'

'You were disembowelled? Gods below, man!' 'Kruppe struggles to taste the wonder of this wondrous vintage, so gasted of flabber is he at said horrendous tale. The world is most cruel, yet salvation unfolds at the last, blessed be all the gods, goddesses, spirits, marsupials and amphibians and

indeed all the rest. Made drunk by punches is poor Kruppe, rocked this way, knocked that, buffeted askew in every direction at once very nearly unto exploding. Beloved Scillara, you tell a most awkward tale, and tell it badly. Despite this, see us here, each one reeling at said poorly told revelations!'

'Perhaps excessive in my efforts at summarizing, I'll grant you,' Scillara allowed. 'But I thought: best to push through the uncomfortable stage, and now here we are, relaxed and eager to quaff down this fine wine. I have decided I like the Phoenix Inn.'

Duiker rose. 'My task complete, I shall—'

'Sit back down, old man,' she said. 'If I have to slap the life back into you I will. Less painful, one hopes, partaking of our company this day, don't you think?'

The historian slowly sat back down.

Kruppe gusted out a sigh. 'Pity us men at this table, we are outnumbered!'

'I take it Cutter's told nothing,' Scillara observed. 'Not even how we almost drowned when the moon broke up and fell out of the sky. Saved by a dragon.'

'I will indeed stay,' said Duiker, 'provided you back up and tell us all this properly, Scillara.'

'As you like.'

'From the moment you first met Heboric.'

'This will take all night,' she said. 'And I'm hungry.'

'Murillio will be delighted to purchase our suppers,' declared Kruppe.

'For once you are right,' Murillio said.

'I don't think you're too fat,' said Cutter. 'I don't think anything like that, Scillara.' *Too good, yes. And why don't you see how Barathol looks at you? As for me, well, Apsalar was smart enough to get away and I won't begrudge her that. In fact, I doubt there's a woman low enough for me anywhere in the world.*

Was that too self-pitying? No, just realistic, he decided.

*Oh, and by the way, everyone, that dragon is wearing silks and biding her time aboard her damned ship, right there in Darujhistan harbour . . . Oh, and did I mention that the city is in imminent danger?*

The bottle of wine was done and Sulty was sent off for another one. Meese was quickly appeased by the orders for supper and the knowledge that, eventually, the swill she stocked would be broached and consumed to excess.

As Scillara told her tale.

While Cutter's mind, sodden with alcohol, wandered through all those thoughts that were anything but self-pitying. *Not a woman anywhere . . .*

Lady Challice Vidikas sat at one end of the table, Shardan Lim on her left, Hanut Orr to her right. For this night she wore emerald green silks, the short coat tight-fitting, collarless to expose her unadorned, powdered throat and low-cut to reveal her scented breasts. Her hair was tied up, speared through with silver pins. Rouge blushed her cheeks. Kohl thickened her lashes. Earrings depended from her ears in tumbling, glittering array, the green of emerald and the blue of sapphire. The coat's short sleeves revealed her bared arms, the skin soft, smooth, slightly plump, unstained by the sun. Leggings of brushed kid leather covered her lower limbs and on her feet was the latest style of sandals, the one with a high peg-like heel.

Amber wine glimmered in crystal goblets. Candlelight painted soft and gold every detail in a pool that faded into gloom beyond the three at the table, so that the servants moved in shadows, appearing only to clear dishes, rearrange settings, and deliver yet more food.

She but picked at her meal, wanting to be somewhat drunk for what would come at the end of this night. The only question she was unable to answer was . . . *which one first?*

Oh, there was sexual excitement – she could not deny that. Both men were hale and attractive, though in very different ways. And both equally obnoxious, but she thought she could live with that. For certain, her heart

would play no role in what was to come, no giving over, no confusion that might lead to conflicted feelings, or feelings of any sort.

She could keep this simple. Everyone made use of what they had, didn't they, especially when what they had proved desirable to others. This was how power accrued, after all. One man here, right or left, would have her this night – had they already decided which one between them? A toss of the knuckles. A wager in flesh. She was not sure – the evening was early yet and thus far she'd seen no overt signs of competition.

Hanut spoke, 'Shardan and I have been discussing you all afternoon, Lady Challice.'

'Oh? How flattering.'

'It was on the night of my uncle's murder, wasn't it? At Lady Simtal's estate – you were there.'

'I was, yes, Hanut.'

'That night, young Gorlas Vidikas saved your life.'

'Yes.'

'And so won your heart,' said Shardan Lim, smiling behind his goblet as he sipped.

'You make it sound an easy thing,' she said, 'winning my heart.'

'Then gratitude made a good start,' Shardan observed as Hanut settled back as if willing to listen and venture nothing else – at least for now. 'He was very young, as were you. An age when charms seemed to flash blindingly bright.'

'And I was dazzled,' she said.

'Gorlas did very well by it, I should say. One hopes he daily expresses his gratitude . . . when he is here, I mean. All the proper, entirely unambiguous gestures and the like.'

Hanut Orr stirred. 'For too long, Lady Vidikas, the House of Orr and the House of D'Arle have been at odds on the Council. Generations of that, and,

as far as I am concerned, for no good reason. I find myself wishing, often, that your father would meet me, to make amends, to forge something new and lasting. An alliance, in fact.'

'An ambitious goal, Hanut Orr,' said Challice. *Unfortunately, my father thinks you are a preening, fatuous ass. A true Orr, in other words.* 'And you are most welcome, I'm sure, to make such an overture. I wish you the Lady's tug.'

'Ah, then I have your blessing in such an endeavour?'

'Of course. Will that impress my father? That remains to be seen.'

'Surely he cherishes you dearly,' Shardan Lim murmured. 'How could he not?'

*I have this list . . .* 'The House of Vidikas was ever a modest presence in the Council,' she said. 'A long, unbroken succession of weak men and women singularly lacking in ambition.'

Hanut Orr snorted and reached for his goblet. 'Excepting the latest, of course.'

'Of course. My point is, my father ascribes little weight to the desires of House Vidikas, and I am now part of that house.'

'Do you chafe?'

She fixed her gaze on Shardan Lim. 'A bold question, sir.'

'My apologies, Lady Vidikas. Yet I have come to cherish you and so only wish you happiness and contentment.'

'Why would you imagine I felt otherwise?'

'Because,' Hanut Orr drawled, 'you've been knocking back the wine this night like a tavern harlot.' And he rose. 'Thank you, Lady Vidikas, for a most enjoyable evening. I must, alas, take my leave.'

Struggling against anger, she managed a nod. 'Of course, Councillor Orr. Forgive me if I do not see you out.'

He smiled. 'Easily done, milady.'

When he was gone, Shardan swore softly under his breath. 'He was angry with you.'

'Oh?' The hand that raised the goblet to her lips was, she saw, trembling.

'Hanut wants your father to come to him, not the other way round. He won't be a squirming pup to anyone.'

'A pup is never strong enough to make the first move, Shardan Lim. He misunderstood my challenge.'

'Because it implies a present failing on his part. A failing of his nerve.'

'Perhaps it does, and that should make him angry with me? How, precisely, does that work?'

Shardan Lim laughed and as he stretched out it was clear that, free now of Hanut Orr's shadow, he was like a deadly flower opening to the night. 'You showed him up for the self-important but weak-willed bully that he is.'

'Unkind words for your friend.'

Shardan Lim stared down at his goblet as he drank a mouthful. Then he said in a growl, 'Hanut Orr is no friend of mine.'

The wine was making her brain feel strangely loose, untethered. She no longer even tasted each sip, there had been so many of them, the servant a silent ghost slipping in to refill her goblet. 'I think he believes otherwise.'

'I doubt it. It was some damned conspiracy with House Orr that saw my father assassinated. And now it seems my family is snared, trapped, and the games just go on and on.'

This was a most unexpected side of the man and she did not know how to respond to it. 'Such honesty humbles me, Shardan Lim. For what it is worth, I will keep what I have heard this night to myself.'

'No need, but thank you anyway. In fact, I'd rather your husband well understood how things stand. Hanut Orr is a dangerous man. House Lim and House Vidikas share many things, principal among them the stigma of

disrespect on the Council. Contempt, even. I have been curious,' and now the look he turned upon her was sharp, searching. 'This venture of your husband's, ever pushing for this ironmonger of his to attain membership in the Council – what does Gorlas play at?'

She blinked in confusion. 'I'm sorry, I have no idea.'

'Might you find out? For me?'

'I am not sure if I can – Gorlas does not confide in me on such matters.'

'Does he confide in you at all?' He went on without waiting for her reply (not that she had one). 'Lady Vidikas – Challice – he is wasting you, do you understand? I see this – gods, it leaves me furious! You are an intelligent woman, a beautiful woman, and he treats you like one of these silver plates. Just one more possession, one more piece in his hoard.'

She set her goblet down. 'What do you want from me, Shardan Lim? Is this some sort of invitation? A conspiracy of love? Trysts behind my husband's back? While he travels here and there, you and I meeting up in some squalid inn? Getting intimate with each other's bodies, then lying back and making pointless plans, endlessly lying to each other about a future together?'

He stared across at her.

All the servants had with uncharacteristic discreetness vanished into the side chambers, the kitchens, anywhere but this dining room. Even the wine server had disappeared. It occurred to Challice that Shardan's manservant had probably been free with coin among the house staff and that sly, silent man was now outside in the courtyard, passing a pipe to eager-eyed menials, and they were all laughing, snickering, rolling their eyes and worse.

Too late, she realized, to change any of that. To scour the lurid thoughts from their petty minds.

'You describe,' Shardan Lim finally said, 'a most sordid arrangement, with all the cynicism of a veteran in such matters. And that I do not believe. You have been faithful, Challice. I would not so care for you otherwise.'

'Oh? Have you been spying on me, then?' It was a mocking question that lost its carefree aura as the man voiced no denial, and she suddenly felt chilled to the bone. 'Following another man's wife around does not seem an honourable thing to do, Shardan Lim.'

'Love has no honour.'

'Love? Or obsession? Is it not your own hunger for possession that has you coveting a woman owned by another man?'

'He does not own you. That is my point, Challice. Such notions of ownership are nothing but twisted lies disguised as love. I have no interest in owning you. Nor in stealing you away – if I had I would have found an excuse to duel your husband long ago, and I would have killed him without compunction. For you. To give you back your life.'

'With you at the grieving widow's side? Oh, that would look odd now, wouldn't it? Me leaning on the arm of the man who murdered my husband. And you talk to me of freedom?' She was, she realized, shocked sober. By what this man was revealing to her; by the stunning depth of his depraved desire.

'Giving you back your life, I said.'

'I will ask you again: what do you want?'

'To show you what it means to be free. To cut your chains. Take me to your bed if you so desire. Or don't. Send me out of here with your boot to my backside. The choice is yours. I want you to feel your freedom, Challice. In your soul – let it burn, bright or dark as you like, but let it *burn*! Filling you entirely.'

Her breaths came fast, shallow. Oh, this was a most unanticipated tactic of his. *Give me nothing, woman. No, give it to yourself instead. Make use of me. As proof. Of your freedom. Tonight you can make yourself free again. The way it felt when you were younger, when there was no husband weighing down your arm. Before the solemn shackles were slipped on.* A most extraordinary invitation indeed. 'Where are my servants?'

'Away for the rest of the night, Lady Vidikas.'

'Just like Hanut Orr. Does he sit in some tavern right now, telling everyone—'

'I arranged nothing with that bastard. And you must realize, he will talk whether anything happens or not. To wound you. Your reputation.'

'My husband will then hear of it, even though nothing has happened.'

'And should you stand before Gorlas and deny the rumours, will he believe you, Challice?'

*No. He wouldn't want to.* 'He will not accept being cuckolded.'

'He will smile because he doesn't care. Until it serves him to challenge one of us, me or Hanut, to a duel. On a point of honour. He is a fine duellist. A cruel one at that. He disregards all rules, all propriety. Victory is all that matters and if that means flinging sand into his opponent's eyes he will do just that. A very dangerous man, Challice. I would not want to face him with rapiers bared. But I will if I have to.' Then he shook his head. 'But it won't be me.'

'No?'

'It will be Hanut Orr. That is the man he wants for you. He's given you to Hanut Orr – another reason he stormed off, since he finally understood that I would not permit it.'

'So in Gorlas's stead this night you have defended my honour.'

'And failed, because Hanut is skewering your reputation even as we speak. When I said you can make use of me, Challice, I meant it. Even now, here, you can tell me to seek out Hanut – yes, I can guess where he is right now – and call him out. I can kill him for you.'

'My reputation . . .'

'Is already ruined, Lady Vidikas, and I am truly sorry for that. Tell me what you would have me do. Please.'

She was silent. It was getting difficult to think clearly. Consequences were crashing down like an avalanche and she was buried, all air driven from her

lungs. Buried, yes, in what had not even happened.

Yet.

'I will try this freedom of yours, Shardan Lim.'

He rose, one hand settling on the grip of his rapier. 'Milady.'

*Oh, how noble.* Snorting, she rose. 'You've taken hold of the wrong weapon.'

His eyes widened. Was the surprise real or feigned? Was there a glimmer of triumph in those blue, blue eyes? She couldn't find it at all.

And that frightened her.

'Shardan . . .'

'Milady?'

'Make no wishes for a future. Do you understand me?'

'I do.'

'I will not free my heart only to chain it anew.'

'Of course you won't. That would be madness.'

She studied him a moment longer, and received nothing new for that effort. 'I am glad I am not drunk,' she said.

And he bowed.

Making, in that one gesture, this night of adultery so very . . . noble.

*

Night seeps into Darujhistan, a thick blinding fog in which people stumble or hide as they walk the alleys and streets. Some are drawn like moths to the lit areas and the welcoming eternal hiss of gas from the wrought iron poles. Others seek to move as one with the darkness, at least until some damned piece of crockery snaps underfoot, or a pebble is sent skittering. And everywhere can be seen the small glitter of rodent eyes, or heard the slither of tails.

Light glows through shutters and bubbled glass windows, but never mind the light and all peaceful slumber and discourse and all the rest such illumination might reveal! Dull and witless the expectations so quickly and predictably surrendered!

A woman in whose soul burned freedom black and blazing arches her back as only the second man in her life slides deep into her and something ignites in her mind – Gorlas ever used his fingers in this place, after all, and fingers cannot match – *gods below!*

But leave that now – truly, imagination suffices to make eloquent all the clumsy shifting about and strange sounds and the fumbling for this and that, and then that – no more! Out into the true darkness, yes, to the fingerless man stalking his next victim.

To a new estate and Captain Torvald Nom of the House Guard, moments from leaving for the night with all security in the so-capable hands of Scorch and Leff (yes, he worked hard on that), who pauses to watch a black two-person carriage trundle into the courtyard, and whose eyes thin to very-most slits of suspicion and curiosity and a niggling feeling of . . . something, as a cloaked, hooded figure steps into view and slides like a bad thought up the stairs and into the main house. *Who* . . . ponder no longer, Torvald Nom! On your way, yes, back home to your loving and suitably impressed wife. Think of nothing but that and that alone and be on your way!

A guard with occasional chest pains is questioning patrons of a bar, seeking witnesses who might have seen someone set out to follow that local man into the alley in order to beat him to death and would no one step forward on behalf of that hapless victim? Might do, aye, if'n any of us liked him, y'see . . .

In a crypt (irrationally well lit, of course) sits a man plotting the downfall of the city, starting with a handful of Malazans, and he sits most contented in the absence of shadows or any other ambivalence imposed upon reality.

Out in Chuffs, as moles sleep in their tiny cots, Bainisk sits down beside Harllo's bed to hear more stories about Darujhistan, for Bainisk was born in

Chuffs and has never left it, you see, and his eyes glow as Harllo whispers about riches and all sorts of wonderful foods and great monuments and statues and blue fire everywhere and before long both are asleep, Harllo in his lumpy bed and Bainisk on the floor beside it, and across the way Venaz sees this and sneers to display his hatred of both Bainisk and Bainisk's new favourite when Venaz used to be his best, but Bainisk was a betrayer, a liar and worse and someday Harllo would pay for that—

Because Harllo was right. He was a boy who drew bullies like a lodestone and this was a cruel fact and his kind were legion and it was a godly blessing how so many survived and grew up to wreak vengeance upon all those people not as smart as they were, but even that is a bitter reward and never quite as satisfying as it might be.

Back to Darujhistan, with relief, as a Great Raven launches herself skyward from the tower of Baruk's estate, watched with evil satisfaction by a squat, overweight demon staring out from a spark-spitting chimney mouth.

And this was a night like any other, a skein of expectations and anticipations, revelations and perturbations. Look around. Look around! On all sides, day and night, light and dark! Every step taken with the firm resolve to believe in the solid ground awaiting it. Every step, one after another, again and again, and no perilous ledge yawns ahead, oh no.

Step and step, now, step and step—

# CHAPTER TEN

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the musicians are swallowed in flames
Every instrument blackening and crumbling to ash
When the dancers stumble and sprawl their diseased limbs
rotting off and twitching the skin sloughing away

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the stars we pushed into the sky loose their roars
And the clouds we built into visible rage do now explode
When the bright princes of privilege march past with
dead smiles
falling from their faces a host of deceiving masks

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When reason sinks into the morass of superstition
Waging a war of ten thousand armies stung to the lash
When we stop looking up even as we begin our mad running
into stupidity's nothingness with heavenly choirs screaming

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the musicians are no more than black grinning sticks
Every instrument wailing its frantic death cry down the road
When the ones left standing have had their mouths cut off
leaving holes from which a charnel wind eternally blows
Will you come and tell me when the music ends
The fire is eating my breath and agony fills this song
When my fingers crack on the strings and fall from my hands
And this dance twists every muscle like burning rope
while your laughter follows down my crumpling corpse

Won't you come and tell me when the music ends
When I can leap away and face one god or a thousand
Or nothing at all into this blessed bliss of oblivion

When I can prise open this box and release cruel and
bitter fury
at all the mad fools crowding the door in panicked flight

Watch me and watch me with eyes wide and shocked
With disbelief with horror with indignant umbrage to upbraid
And the shouted *Nays* are like drumbeats announcing a truth
The music ends my friends, my vile, despicable friends, and see
me –
see me slam the door slam it hard – in all your faces!

*The Music Ends*
Fisher kel Tath

His boots crunched on water-worn stones slick with mist as he made his way to the water's edge. The steep slopes of the surrounding mountainsides were verdant, thick rainforest, crimson-barked trees towering high, beards of moss hanging from toppled trunks.

Endest Silann leaned on his stolid walking stick, the muscles of his legs trembling. He looked round as he slowly regained his breath. It was chilly, the sun's arc just slipping past the western peaks, and shadow swallowed the river valley.

Black water rushed by and he felt its cold – no need to squat down, no need to slide a hand into the tugging current. This dark river was, he could see now, nothing like Dorssan Ryl. How could he have expected otherwise? The new is ever but a mangled echo of the old and whatever whispers of similarity one imagined do naught but sting with pain, leaving one blistered with loss. Oh, he had been a fool, to have journeyed all this way. Seeking what? Even that he could not answer.

No, perhaps he could. *Escape. Brief, yes, but escape none the less.* The coward flees, knowing he must return, wishing that the return journey might kill him, take his life as it did the old everywhere. *But listen! You can shape your soul – make it a bucket, a leaking one that you carry about. Or your soul can be a rope, thick and twisted, refusing to break even as it buckles to one knot after another. Choose your image, Endest Silann. You are here, you've made it this far, haven't you? And as he told you . . . not much farther to go. Not much farther at all.*

He smelled woodsmoke.

Startled, alarmed, he turned away from the rush of the river. Faced upstream whence came the late afternoon breeze. There, in distant gloom, the muted glow of a campfire.

*Ah, no escape after all.* He'd wanted solitude, face to face with intractable, indifferent nature. He'd wanted to feel . . .

irrelevant. He'd wanted the wildness to punch him senseless, leave him humiliated, reduced to a wretch. Oh, he had wanted plenty, hadn't he?

With a sour grunt, Endest Silann began walking upstream. At the very least, the fire would warm his hands.

Thirty paces away, he could see the lone figure facing the smoky flames. Huge, round-shouldered, seated on a fallen log. And Endest Silann smiled in recognition.

Two trout speared on skewers cooked above the fire. A pot of simmering tea sat with one blackened shoulder banked in coals. Two tin cups warmed on the flat rock making up one side of the hearth.

Another log waited opposite the one on which sat the warlord, Caladan Brood, who slowly twisted round to watch Endest Silann approach. The broad, oddly bestial face split into a wry smile. 'Of all the guests I imagined this night, old friend, you did not come to mind. Forgive me. You took your time since beginning your descent into this valley, but for that I will happily make allowances – but do not complain if the fish is overcooked.'

'Complaints are far away and will remain so, Caladan. You have awakened my appetite – for food, drink and, most of all, company.'

'Then sit, make yourself comfortable.'

'So you did indeed disband your army after the siege,' said Endest Silann, making his way over to settle himself down. 'There were rumours. Of course, my master said nothing.'

'See me now,' said the warlord, 'commanding an army of wet stones, and yes, it proves far less troublesome than the last one. Finally, I can sleep soundly at night.

Although, matching wits with these trout has challenged me mightily. There, take one of those plates, and here – beware the bones, though,' he added as he set a fish on the plate.

'Alone here, Caladan Brood – it makes me wonder if you are hiding.'

'It may be that I am, Endest Silann. Unfortunately, hiding never works.'

'No, it never does.'

Neither spoke for a time as they ate their supper. The trout was indeed overdone but Endest Silann said nothing, for it was delicious none the less.

If Anomander Rake was a mystery shrouded in darkness, then Caladan Brood was one clothed in geniality. Spare with words, he nevertheless could make virtually anyone feel welcome and, indeed, appreciated. Or rather, he could when the pressures of command weren't crouched on his shoulders like a damned mountain. This night, then, Endest Silann well understood, was a gift, all the more precious in that it was wholly unexpected.

When the meal was done, night's arrival closed out the world beyond the fire's light. The rush of the river was a voice, a presence. Water flowed indifferent to the heave and plunge of the sun, the shrouded moon and the slow spin of the stars. The sound reached them in a song without words, and all effort to grasp its meaning was hopeless, for, like the water itself, one could not grasp hold of sound. The flow was ceaseless and immeasurable and just as stillness did not in fact exist, so neither did true, absolute silence.

'Why are you here?' Endest Silann asked after a time.

'I wish I could answer you, old friend, and Burn knows the desire to ease the burden is almost overwhelming.'

'You are assuming, Caladan, that I am ignorant of what awaits us.'

'No, I do not do that – after all, you have sought a pilgrimage, out to this river – and among the Tiste Andii, this place has proved a mysterious lure. Yet you ask why I am here, and so your knowledge must be . . . incomplete. Endest Silann, I cannot say more. I cannot help you.'

The old Tiste Andii looked away, off into the dark where the river sang to the night. So, others had come here, then. Some instinctive need drawing them, yes, to the ghost of Dorssan Ryl. He wondered if they had felt the same disappointment as he had upon seeing these black (but not black enough) waters. *It is not the same. Nothing ever is, beginning with ourselves.* 'I do not,' he said, 'believe much in forgiveness.'

'What of restitution?'

The question stunned him, stole his breath. The river rushed with the sound of ten thousand voices and those cries filled his head, spread into his chest to grip his heart. Cold pooled in his gut. *By the Abyss . . . such . . . ambition.* He felt the icy trickle of tears on his fire-warmed cheeks. 'I will do all I can.'

'He knows that,' Caladan Brood said with such compassion that Endest Silann almost cried out. 'You might not believe this now,' the huge warrior continued, 'but you will find this pilgrimage worthwhile. A remembrance to give strength when you need it most.'

No, he did not believe that now, and could not imagine ever believing it. Even so . . . the *ambition*. So appalling, so breathtaking.

Caladan Brood poured the tea and set a cup into Endest's hands. The tin shot heat into his chilled fingers. The warlord was standing beside him now.

'Listen to the river, Endest Silann. Such a peaceful sound . . .'

But in the ancient Tiste Andii's mind that sound was a wailing chorus, an overwhelming flood of loss and despair. The ghost of Dorssan Ryl? No, this was where that long dead river emptied out, feeding the midnight madness of its history into a torrent where it swirled with a thousand other currents. Endless variations on the same bitter flavour.

And as he stared into the flames he saw once more the city dying in a conflagration. Kharkanas beneath the raging sky. Blinding ash like sand in the eyes, smoke like poison in the lungs. Mother Darkness in her fury, denying her children, turning away as they died and died. And died.

*Listen to the river. Remember the voices.*

*Wait, as does the warlord here. Wait, to see what comes.*

The smell of the smoke remained long after the fire was done. They rode in on to charred ground and blackened wreckage. Collapsed, crumbled inward, the enormous carriage still reared like a malignant smoking pyre in the centre of stained earth. Detritus was scattered about to mark the disintegration of the community. Yet, although the scene was one of

slaughter, there were no bodies. Trails set off in all directions, some broader than others.

Samar Dev studied the scene for a time, then watched as Traveller dismounted to walk over to the edge of the camp, where he began examining some of the tracks leading away. He was an odd man, she decided. Quiet, self-contained, a man used to being alone, yet beneath it all was a current of . . . yes, mayhem. As if it was his own solitude that kept the world safe.

Once, long ago now, she had found herself in the company of another warrior equally familiar with that concept. But there the similarity ended. Karsa Orlong, notwithstanding that first journey into the besieged fortress outside Ugarat, thrived on an audience. *Witness*, he would say, in full expectation of just that. He wanted his every deed observed, as if each set of eyes existed solely to mark Karsa Orlong, and the minds behind them served, to the exclusion of all else, to recount to all what he had done, what he had said, what he had begun and what he had ended. *He makes us his history. Every witness contributes to the narrative – the life, the deeds of Toblakai – a narrative to which we are, each of us, bound.*

Chains and shackles snaked out from the burned carriage. Empty, of course. And yet, despite this, Samar Dev understood that the survivors of this place remained slaves. Chained to Karsa Orlong, their liberator, chained to yet another grim episode in his history. *He gives us freedom and enslaves us all. Oh, now there is irony. All the sweeter for that he does not mean to, no, the very opposite each and every time. The damned fool.*

'Many took horses, loaded down with loot,' Traveller said, returning to his mount. 'One trail heads north, the least marked – I believe it belongs to your friend.'

*My friend.*

'He is not far ahead of us now, and still on foot. We should catch up to him today.'

She nodded.

Traveller studied her for a moment. He then swung himself on to his horse and collected the reins. 'Samar Dev, I cannot work out what happened here.'

'He did,' she replied. 'He happened here.'

'He killed no one. From what you have told me, well, I thought to find something else. It is as if he simply walked up to them and said, "It's over".' He frowned across at her. 'How can that be?'

She shook her head.

He grunted, guiding his horse round. 'The scourge of the Skathandi has ended.'

'It has.'

'My fear of your companion has . . . deepened. I am ever more reluctant to find him.'

'But that will not stop you, will it? If he carries the Emperor's Sword . . .'

He did not reply. He didn't need to.

They set out at the canter. Northward.

The wind cut across from the west, sun-warmed and dry. The few clouds scudding past overhead were thin and shredded. Ravens or hawks circled, wheeling specks, and Samar Dev thought of flies buzzing the corpse of the earth.

She spat to clear away the taste of woodsmoke.

A short time later they came upon a small camp. Three men, two pregnant women. The fear in their eyes warred with abject resignation as Samar Dev and Traveller came up and reined in. The men had not sought to flee, proof of the rarest kind of courage – the women were too burdened to run, so the men had stayed and if that meant death, then so be it.

Details like these ever humbled Samar Dev.

'You are following the Toblakai,' Traveller said, dismounting. They stared, saying nothing. Traveller half turned and gestured for Samar Dev. Curious, she slipped down.

'Can you see to the health of the women?' he asked her in a low voice.

'All right,' she said, then watched as the Dal Honese warrior led the three men off to one side. Bemused, Samar Dev approached the women. Both, she saw, were far along in their pregnancies, and then she noted that both seemed . . . not quite human. Furtive eyes the hue of tawny grasses, a kind of animal wariness along with the resignation she had noted earlier, but now she understood it as the fatalism of the victim, the hunted, the prey. Yes, she could imagine seeing such eyes in the antelope with the leopard's jaws closed on its throat. The image left her feeling rattled.

'I am a witch,' she said. 'Shoulder Woman.'

Both remained sitting. They stared in silence.

She edged closer and crouched down opposite them. They bore features both human and animal, as if they represented some alternative version of human beings. Dark-skinned, slope-browed, with broad mouths full-lipped and probably – when not taut with anxiety – unusually expressive. Both looked well fed, essentially healthy. Both emanated that strange completeness that only pregnant women possessed. When everything outward faced inward. In a less generous moment she might call it *smugness* but this was not such a moment. Besides, there was in those auras something animal that made it all seem proper, natural, as if this was exclusively and precisely what women were for.

Now *that* notion irritated her.

She straightened and walked over to where Traveller stood with the men. 'They are fine,' she said.

His brows rose at her tone, but he said nothing.

'So,' she asked, 'what secrets have they revealed?'

'The sword he carries was made of flint, or obsidian. Stone.'

'Then he rejected the Crippled God. No, I'm not surprised. He won't do what's expected. Ever. It's part of his damned religion, I suspect. What now, Traveller?'

He sighed. 'We will catch up with him anyway.' A brief smile. 'With less trepidation now.'

'There's still the risk,' she said, 'of an . . . argument.'

They returned to their horses.

'The Skathandi king was dying,' Traveller explained as they both rode out from the camp. 'He bequeathed his kingdom to your friend. Who then dissolved it, freeing all the slaves, warning off the soldiers. Taking nothing for himself. Nothing at all.'

She grunted.

Traveller was silent for a moment and then he said, 'A man like that . . . well, I am curious. I would like to meet him.'

'Don't expect hugs and kisses,' she said.

'He will not be pleased to see you?'

'I have no idea, although I am bringing him his horse, which should count for something.'

'Does he know how you feel about him?'

She shot him a look, and then snorted. 'He may think he does but the truth is *I* don't know how I feel about him, so whatever he's thinking it's bound to be wrong. Now that we're closing in, I'm the one getting more nervous. It's ridiculous, I know.'

'It seems your examination of those two women has soured your mood. Why?'

'I don't know what you wanted me to do about them. They were pregnant, not in labour. They looked hale enough, better than I expected in fact. They didn't need me poking and prodding. The babies will be born and they will live or they will die. Same for the mothers. It's just how things are.'

'My apologies, Samar Dev. I should not have so ordered you about. Were I in your place, I too would have been offended by the presumption.'

Was that what had annoyed her? Possibly. Equally likely, her mute acquiescence, the doe-eyed ease with which she had fallen into that subservient role. *As when I was with Karsa Orlong. Oh, I think I now step on to the thinnest crust of sand above some bottomless pit. Samar Dev discovers her very own secret weaknesses. Was she foul of mood earlier? See her now.*

A talent, a sensitivity – *something* – clearly told Traveller to say nothing more.

They rode on, the horses' hoofs thumping the taut drum of the earth. The warm wind slid dry as sand. In a low, broad depression on their left stood six pronghorn antelope, watching them pass. Rust-red slabs of flat rock tilted up through the thin ground along the spines of hills. Long-billed birds of some kind perched on them, their plumage the same mix of hues. 'It is all the same,' she murmured.

'Samar Dev? Did you speak?'

She shrugged. 'The way so many animals are made to match their surroundings. I wonder, if all this grass suddenly grew blood red, how long before the markings on those antelope shift into patterns of red? You'd think it could never be the other way round, but you would be wrong. See those flowers – the bright colours to attract the right insects. If the right insects don't come to collect the pollen the flower dies. So, brighter is better. Plants and animals, it goes back and forth, the whole thing inseparable and dependent. Despite this, nothing stays the same.'

'True, nothing ever stays the same.'

'Those women back there . . .'

'Gandaru. Kin to the Kindaru and Sinbarl – so the men explained.'

'Not true humans.'

'No.'

'Yet true to themselves none the less.'

'I imagine so, Samar Dev.'

'They broke my heart, Traveller. Against us, they don't stand a chance.'

He glanced across at her. 'That is quite a presumption.'

'It is?'

'We are riding towards a Tartheno Toblakai, belonging to a remnant tribe isolated somewhere in northern Genabackis. You tell me that Karsa Orlong intends to deliver destruction to all the "children" of the world – to us, in other words. When you speak of this, I see fear in your eyes. A conviction that he will succeed. So now, tell me, against one such as Karsa Orlong and his kind, do we stand a chance?'

'Of course we do, because we can fight back. What can these gentle Gandaru manage? Nothing. They can hide, and when that fails they are killed, or enslaved. Those two women were probably raped. Used. Vessels for human seed.'

'Barring the rape, every animal we hunt for food possesses the same few choices. Hide or flee.'

'Until there is no place left to hide.'

'And when the animals go, so too will we.'

She barked a laugh. 'You might believe so, Traveller. No, we won't go that way. We'll just fill the empty lands with cattle, with sheep and goats. Or break up the ground and plant corn. There is no stopping us.'

'Except, perhaps, for Karsa Orlong.'

And there, then, was the truth of all this. Karsa Orlong pronounced a future of destruction, extinction. *And she wished him well.* 'There,' Traveller said in a different voice, and he rose in his stirrups. 'He didn't travel too far after all—' From Havok's saddle, Samar Dev could now see him. He had halted and was facing them, a thousand paces distant. Two horses stood near him, and there were humps in the grass of the knoll, scattered like ant

hills or boulders but, she knew, neither of those. 'He was attacked,' she said. 'The idiots should have left well enough alone.'

'I'm sure their ghosts concur,' Traveller said.

They cantered closer.

The Toblakai looked no different from the last time she had seen him – there on the sands of the arena in Letheras. As sure, as solid, as undeniable as ever. *'I shall kill him . . . once.'* And so he did. Defying . . . everything. Oh, he was looking at her now, and at Havok, with the air of a master summoning his favourite hunting dog.

And suddenly she was furious. 'This wasn't obligation!' she snapped, savagely reining in directly in front of him. 'You abandoned us – there in that damned foreign city! "Do this when the time is right", and so I did! *Where the Hood did you go? And—'*

And then she yelped, as the huge warrior swept her off the saddle with one massive arm, and closed her in a suffocating embrace, and the bastard was laughing and even Traveller – curse the fool – was grinning, although to be sure it was a hard grin, mindful as he clearly was of the half-dozen bodies lying amidst blood and entrails in the grasses.

'Witch!'

'Set me down!'

'I am amazed,' he bellowed, 'that Havok suffered you all this way!'

'Down!'

So he dropped her. Jarring her knees, sending her down with a thump on her backside, every bone rattled. She glared up at him.

But Karsa Orlong had already turned away and was eyeing Traveller, who remained on his horse. 'You – are you her husband then? She must have had one somewhere – no other reason for her forever refusing me. Very well, we shall fight for her, you and me—'

'Be quiet, Karsa! He's not my husband and no one's fighting for me. *Because I belong to no one but me!* Do you understand? Will you *ever* understand?'

'Samar Dev has spoken,' said Traveller. 'We met not long ago, both journeying on this plain. We chose to ride as companions. I am from Dal Hon, on the continent of Quon Tali—'

Karsa grunted. 'Malazan.'

An answering nod. 'I am called Traveller.'

'You hide your name.'

'What I hide merely begins with my name, Karsa Orlong.'

The Toblakai's eyes thinned at that.

'You bear the tattoos,' Traveller went on, 'of an escaped slave of Seven Cities. Or, rather, a recaptured one. Clearly, the chains did not hold you for long.'

Samar Dev had picked herself up and was now brushing the dust from her clothes. 'Are these Skathandi?' she asked, gesturing at the bodies. 'Karsa?'

The giant turned away from his study of the Malazan. 'Idiots,' he said. 'Seeking vengeance for the dead king – as if I killed him.'

'Did you?'

'No.'

'Well,' she said, 'at least now I will have a horse of my own.'

Karsa walked over to Havok and settled a hand on his neck. The beast's nostrils flared and the lips peeled back to reveal the overlong fangs. Karsa laughed. 'Yes, old friend, I smell of death. When was it never thus?' And he laughed again.

'Hood take you, Karsa Orlong – what happened?'

He frowned at her. 'What do you mean, witch?'

'You killed the Emperor.'

'I said I would, and so I did.' He paused, and then said, 'And now this Malazan speaks as if he would make me a slave once more.'

'Not at all,' said Traveller. 'It just seems as if you have lived an eventful life, Toblakai. I only regret that I will probably never hear your tale, for I gather that you are not the talkative type.'

Karsa Orlong bared his teeth, and then swung up into the saddle. 'I am riding north,' he said.

'As am I,' replied Traveller.

Samar Dev collected both horses and tied a long lead to the one she decided she would not ride, then climbed into the saddle of the other – a russet gelding with a broad back and disinterested eyes. 'I think I want to go home,' she pronounced. 'Meaning I need to find a port, presumably on the western coast of this continent.'

Traveller said, 'I ride to Darujhistan. Ships ply the lake and the river that flows to the coast you seek. I would welcome the company, Samar Dev.'

'Darujhistan,' said Karsa Orlong. 'I have heard of that city. Defied the Malazan Empire and so still free. I will see it for myself.'

'Fine then,' Samar Dev snapped. 'Let's ride on, to the next pile of corpses – and with you for company, Karsa Orlong, that shouldn't be long – and then we'll ride to the next one and so on, right across this entire continent. To Darujhistan! Wherever in Hood's name that is.'

'I will see it,' Karsa said again. 'But I will not stay long.' And he looked at her with suddenly fierce eyes. 'I am returning home, witch.'

'To forge your army,' she said, nodding, sudden nerves tingling in her gut.

'And then the world shall witness.'

'Yes.'

After a moment, the three set out, Karsa Orlong on her left, Traveller on her right, neither speaking, yet they were histories, tomes of past, present

and future. Between them, she felt like a crumpled page of parchment, her life a minor scrawl.

High, high above them, a Great Raven fixed preternatural eyes upon the three figures far below, and loosed a piercing cry, then tilted its broad black-sail wings and raced on a current of chill wind, rushing east.

She thought she might be dead. Every step she took was effortless, a product of will and nothing else – no shifting of weight, no swing of legs nor flexing of knees. Will carried her where she sought to go, to that place of formless light where the white sand glowed blindingly bright beneath her, at the proper distance had she been standing. Yet, looking down, she saw nothing of her own body. No limbs, no torso, and nowhere to any side could she see her shadow.

Voices droned somewhere ahead, but she was not yet ready for them, so she remained where she was, surrounded in warmth and light.

Pulses, as from torches flaring through thick mist, slowly approached, disconnected from the droning voices, and she now saw a line of figures drawing towards her. Women, heads tilted down, long hair over their faces, naked, each one heavy with pregnancy. The torch fires hovered over each one, fist-sized suns in which rainbow flames flickered and spun.

Salind wanted to recoil. She was a Child of a Dead Seed, after all. Born from a womb of madness. She had nothing for these women. She was no longer a priestess, no longer able to confer the blessing of anyone, no god and least of all herself, upon any child waiting to tumble into the world.

Yet those seething orbs of flame – she knew they were the souls of the unborn, the not-yet-born, and these mothers were walking towards her, with purpose, with need.

*I can give you nothing! Go away!*

Still they came on, faces lifting, revealing eyes dark and empty, and seemed not to see her even as, one by one, they walked *through* Salind.

Gods, some of these women were not even human.

And as each one passed through her, she felt the life of the child within. She saw the birth unfolding, saw the small creature with those strangely wise eyes that seemed to belong to every newborn (except, perhaps, her own). And then the years rushing on, the child growing, faces taking the shape they would carry into old age—

But not all. As mother after mother stepped through her, futures flashed bright, and some died quickly indeed. Fraught, flickering sparks, ebbing, winking out, darkness rushing in. And at these she cried out, filled with anguish even as she understood that souls travelled countless journeys, of which only one could be known by a mortal – so many, in countless perturbations – and that the loss belonged only to others, never to the child itself, for in its inarticulate, ineffable wisdom, understanding was absolute; the passage of life that seemed tragically short could well be the perfect duration, the experience complete—

Others, however, died in violence, and this was a crime, an outrage against life itself. Here, among these souls, there was fury, shock, denial. There was railing, struggling, bitter defiance. No, some deaths were as they should be, but others were not. From somewhere a woman's voice began speaking.

*'Bless them, that they not be taken.*

*'Bless them, that they begin in their time and that they end in its fullness.*

*'Bless them, in the name of the Redeemer, against the cruel harvesters of souls, the takers of life.*

*'Bless them, Daughter of Death, that each life shall be as it is written, for peace is born of completion, and completion denied – completion of all potential, all promised in life – is a crime, a sin, a consignation to eternal damnation. Beware the takers, the users! The blight of killers!*

*'They are coming! Again and again, they harvest the souls—'*

That strange voice was shrieking now, and Salind sought to flee but all will had vanished. She was trapped in this one place, as mother after mother

plunged into her, eyes black and wide, mouths gaping in a chorus of screams, wailing terror, heart-crushing fear for their unborn children—

All at once she heard the droning voices again, summoning her, inviting her into . . . into what?

Sanctuary.

With a cry tearing loose from her throat, Salind pulled away, raced towards those voices—

And opened her eyes. Low candlelight surrounded her. She was lying on a bed. The voices embraced her from all sides and, blinking, she sought to sit up.

So weak—

An arm slipped behind her shoulders, helped her rise as pillows were pushed underneath. She stared up at a familiar, alien face. 'Spinnock Durav.'

He nodded.

Others were rising into view now. Tiste Andii women, all in dark shapeless robes, eyes averted as they began filing out of the chamber, taking their chanting song with them.

Those voices – so heavy, so solid – they truly belonged to these women? She was astonished, half disbelieving, and yet . . .

'You almost died,' Spinnock Durav said. 'The healers called you back – the priestesses.'

'But – why?'

His smile was wry. 'I called in a favour or two. But I think, once they attended you, there was more to it. An obligation, perhaps. You are, after all, a sister priestess – oh, betrothed to a different ascendant, true enough, but that did not matter. Or,' and he smiled again, 'so it turned out.'

*Yes, but why? Why did you bring me back? I don't want*— oh, she could not complete that thought. Understanding now, at last, how vast the sin of suicide – of course, it would not have been that, would it? To have simply

slipped away, taken by whatever sickness afflicted her. Was it not a kind of wisdom to surrender?

'No,' she mumbled, 'it isn't.'

'Salind?'

'To bless,' she said, 'is to confer a hope. Is that enough? To make sacred the wish for good fortune, a fulfilled life? What can it achieve?'

He was studying her face. 'High Priestess,' he now said, haltingly, as if truly attempting an answer, 'in blessing, you purchase a moment of peace, in the one being blessed, in the one for whom blessing is asked. Perhaps it does not last, but the gift you provide, well, its value never fades.'

She turned her head, looked away. Beyond the candles, she saw a wall crowded with Andiian hieroglyphs and a procession of painted figures, all facing one way, to where stood the image of a woman whose back was turned, denying all those beseeching her. A mother rejecting her children – she could see how the artist had struggled with all those upturned faces, the despair and anguish twisting them – painted in tears, yes.

'I must go back,' she said.

'Back? Where?'

'The camp, the place of the pilgrims.'

'You are not yet strong enough, High Priestess.'

Her words to him had stripped away his using her chosen name. He was seeing her now as a High Priestess. She felt a twinge of loss at that. But now was not the time to contemplate the significance of such things. Spinnock Durav was right – she was too weak. Even these thoughts exhausted her. 'As soon as I can,' she said.

'Of course.'

'They are in danger.'

'What would you have me do?'

She finally looked back at him. 'Nothing. This belongs to me. And Seerdomin.'

At the mention of that name the Tiste Andii winced. 'High Priestess—' 'He will not reject me again.'

'He is missing.'

'What?'

'I cannot find him. I am sorry, but I am fairly certain he is no longer in Black Coral.'

'No matter,' she said, struggling to believe her own words. 'No matter. He will come when he is needed.' She could see that Spinnock Durav was sceptical, but she would not berate him for that. 'The Redeemer brought me to the edge of death,' she said, 'to show me what was needed. To show me why I was needed.' She paused. 'Does that sound arrogant? It does, doesn't it?'

His sigh was ragged. He stood. 'I will return to check on you, High Priestess. For now, sleep.'

Oh, she had offended him, but how? 'Wait, Spinnock Durav—'

'It is all right,' he said. 'You have misread me. Well, perhaps not entirely. You spoke of your god showing you what was needed – something we Tiste Andii ever yearn for but will not ever achieve. Then you doubt yourself. Arrogance? Abyss below, High Priestess. Is this how you feel when the Redeemer *blesses* you?'

Then she was alone in the chamber. Candle flames wavering in the wake of Spinnock Durav's departure, the agitated light making the figures writhe on the walls.

Still the mother stood, turned away.

Salind felt a twist of anger. *Bless your children, Mother Dark. They have suffered long enough. I say this in gratitude to your own priestesses, who have given me back my life. I say it in the name of redemption. Bless your children, woman.*

The candles settled once more, flames standing tall, immune to Salind's meek agitations. Nowhere in this room was there darkness and that, she realized, was answer enough.

The old blood splashed on the walls was black, eager to swallow the lantern's light. Dust still trickled down from stress fractures in the canted ceiling, reminding Seerdomin that half a mountain stood above him. The keep's upper levels were crushed, collapsed, yet still settling even after all this time. Perhaps, some time soon, these lower tunnels would give away, and the massive ruin atop the hollowed-out cliff would simply tilt and slide into the sea.

In the meantime, there were these unlit, wending, buckled corridors, a chaotic maze where no one belonged, and yet boot prints tracked the thick, gritty dust. Looters? Perhaps, although Seerdomin well knew there was little to be found in these lower levels. He had walked these routes many times, doing what he could for the various prisoners of the Pannion Seer, though it was never enough – no, never enough.

If there was a curse, a most vicious kind of curse, whereby a decent person found him or herself in inescapable servitude to a creature of pure, unmitigated evil, then Seerdomin had lived it. Decency did not exculpate. Honour purchased no abeyance on crimes against humanity. And as for duty, well, it increasingly seemed the sole excuse of the morally despicable. He would offer up none of these in defence of the things he had done at his master's behest. Nor would he speak of duress, of the understandable desire to stay alive under the threat of deadly coercion. None of these was sufficient. When undeniable crimes had been committed, justification was the act of a coward. *And it was our cowardice that permitted such crimes in the first place.* No tyrant could thrive where every subject said *no*.

*The tyrant thrives when the first fucking fool salutes.*

He well understood that many people delighted in such societies – there had been fellow Seerdomin, most of them in fact, who revelled in the fear and the obedience that fear commanded. And this was what had led him here, trailing an old palace retainer of the Seer who had made his furtive way into the ruins of the old keep. No, not a looter. A sordid conspiracy was

afoot, Seerdomin was certain of that. Survivors of one nightmare seeking to nurture yet another. That man would not be alone once he reached his destination.

He closed the shutter to the lantern once more and continued on.

Malazan soldiers had died here, along with the Pannion's own. Seguleh had carved through the ranks of palace guard. Seerdomin could almost hear the echoes of that slaughter, the cries of the dying, the desperate pleading against cruel mischance, the stinging clash of weapons. He came to a set of steps leading down. Rubble had been cleared away. From somewhere below came the murmur of voices.

They had set no guard, proof of their confidence, and as he stealthily descended he could make out the glow of lanterns emanating from the cell down below.

This chamber had once been home to the one called Toc the Younger. Chained against one wall, well within reach of the Seer's monstrous mother. Seerdomin's paltry gifts of mercy had probably stung like droplets of acid on the poor man. Better to have left him to go entirely mad, escaping into that oblivious world where everything was so thoroughly broken that repair was impossible. He could still smell the reek of the K'Chain matron.

The voices were becoming distinguishable – three, maybe four conspirators. He could hear the excitement, the sweet glee, along with the usual self-importance, the songs of those who played games with lives – it was the same the world over, in every history, ever the same.

He had crushed down his outrage so long ago, it was a struggle to stir it into life once more, but he would need it. Sizzling, yet hard, controlled, peremptory. Three steps from the floor, still in darkness, he slowly drew out his tulwar. It did not matter what they were discussing. It did not even matter if their plans were pathetic, doomed to fail. It was the very act that awakened in Seerdomin the heart of murder, so that it now drummed through him, thunderous with contempt and disgust, ready to do what was needed.

When he first stepped into the chamber, none of the four seated at the table even noticed, permitting him to take another stride, close enough to send his broad-bladed weapon through the first face that lifted towards him, cutting it in half. His return attack was a looping backswing, chopping through the neck of the man to the right, who, in lurching upright, seemed to offer his throat to that slashing edge like a willing sacrifice. As his head tumbled away, the body stumbling as it backed over the chair, Seerdomin grasped one edge of the table and flipped it into the air, hammering it into the man on the left, who fell beneath the table's weight. Leaving one man directly opposite Seerdomin.

Pleading eyes, a hand scrabbling at the ornate dagger at the belt, backing away—

Not nearly fast enough, as Seerdomin moved forward and swung his heavy tulwar down, cutting through the upraised forearms and carving into the man's upper chest, through clavicle and down one side of the sternum. The edge jammed at the fourth rib, forcing Seerdomin to kick the corpse loose. He then turned to the last conspirator.

The old palace retainer. Spittle on his lips, the reek of urine rising like steam. 'No, please—'

'Do you know me, Hegest?'

A quick nod. 'A man of honour – what you have done here—'

'Defies what you would expect of an honourable man, and it is that very expectation that frees you to scheme and plot. Alas, Hegest, your expectation was wrong. Fatally so. Black Coral is at peace, for the first time in decades – freed of terror. And yet you chafe, dreaming no doubt of your old station, of all the excesses you were privileged to possess.'

'I throw myself upon the mercy of the Son of Darkness—'

'You can't throw yourself that far, Hegest. I am going to kill you, here, now. I can do it quick, or slow. If you answer my questions, I will grant you the mercy you have never spared others. If you refuse, I will do to you as

you have done to many, many victims – and yes, I well remember. Which fate will it be, Hegest?'

'I will tell you everything, Seerdomin. In exchange for my life.'

'Your life is not the coin of this deal.'

The man began weeping.

'Enough of that,' Seerdomin growled. 'Today, I am as you once were, Hegest. Tell me, did the tears of your victims soften your heart? No, not once. So wipe your face. And give me your answer.'

And so the man did, and Seerdomin began asking his questions.

Later, and true to his word, Seerdomin showed mercy, in so far as that word meant anything when taking someone else's life, and he well knew it didn't mean much. He cleaned his weapon on Hegest's cloak.

Was he any different, then, from these fools? There were countless avenues he could take that would lead him to assert otherwise, each one tortured and malign with deceit. Without doubt, he told himself as he made his way out, what he had done ended something, whereas what these fools had been planning was the beginning of something else, something foul and sure to spill innocent blood. By this measure, his crime was far the lesser of the two. So why, then, did his soul feel stained, damaged?

Cogent reasoning could lead a man, step by logical step, into horror. He now carried with him a list of names, the sordid details of a scheme to drive out the Tiste Andii, and while he knew it was destined to fail, to leave it free was to invite chaos and misery. And so he would have to kill again. Quietly, revealing nothing to anyone, for this was an act of shame. For his kind, for humans and their stupid, vicious inclinations.

Yet he did not want to be the hand of justice, for that hand was ever bloody and often indiscriminate, prone to excesses of all sorts.

The cruellest detail among all that he had learned this night was that this web of conspiracy reached out to the pilgrim camp. Hegest had not known who the players were out there, but it was clear that they were important,

perhaps even essential. Seerdomin would have to go back to the camp and the very thought sickened him.

Salind, the High Priestess, was she one of the conspirators? Was this act of usurpation at its heart a religious one? It would not be the first time that a religion or cult ignited with the fires of self-righteous certainty and puritanical zeal, leading to ghastly conflict, and had he not heard – more than once – the bold assertion that the Son of Darkness held no claim upon the region outside Night? An absurd notion, yes, an indefensible one, the very kind fanatics converged upon, clenched fists held high in the air.

He had, for a time, nurtured the belief that he was not unique in his appreciation of the rule of the Tiste Andii, and his respect for the wisdom displayed again and again by the Son of Darkness. The gift of peace and stability, the sure, unambiguous rules of law imposed by a people whose own civilization spanned tens of thousands of years – even longer if the rumours were at all accurate. How could any human begrudge this gift?

Many did, it was now clear. The notion of freedom could make even peace and order seem oppressive, generate the suspicion of some hidden purpose, some vast deceit, some unspecified crime being perpetrated beyond human ken. That was a generous way of looking at it; the alternative was to acknowledge that humans were intrinsically conflicted, cursed with acquisitive addictions of the spirit.

He reached the steep ramp leading to the well-hidden entrance to the tunnels, rats skittering from his path, and emerged into the warmer, drier air of Night. Yes, he would have to go to the pilgrim camp, but not now. This would demand some planning. Besides, if he could excise the cancer in the city, then the conspirators out there would find themselves isolated, helpless and incapable of achieving anything. He could then deal with them at his leisure.

Yes, that was a better course. Reasonable and methodical, as justice should be. He was not deliberately avoiding such a journey.

Satisfied with these arguments, Seerdomin set out to begin his night of slaughter, and here, in this city, night was without end.

The rats watched him set off. They could smell the blood on him, and more than one had been witness to the slaughter far below, and certain of these now ambled away from the ruin, heading for the world of daylight beyond the shroud.

Summoned, yes, by their master, the one known as Monkrat, an amusing enough name, implicitly contemptuous and derisive. What none of the man's associates truly understood was the truth underlying that name. *Monkrat, yes. The Monk of Rats, priest and wizard, conjuror and binder of spirits. Laugh and snicker if you like . . . at your peril.*

The liberators had found an enemy, and something would have to be done about that.

The city of Bastion crouched above the vast dying lake, its stolid, squat walls blackened and streaked with some kind of oil. The shanties and hovels surrounding the wall had been burned and then razed, the charred wreckage strewn down the slope leading to the cobbled road. Smoke hung above the battlements, thick and surly.

Cradling his battered hands – the reins looped loose about them – Nimander squinted up at the city and its yawning gates. No guards in sight, not a single figure on the walls. Except for the smoke the city looked lifeless, abandoned.

Riding at his side in the front of their modest column, Skintick said, 'A name like "Bastion" invites images of ferocious defenders, bristling with all manner of weapons, suspicious of every foreigner climbing towards the gates. So,' he added with a sigh, 'we must be witness here to the blessed indolence of saemankelyk, the Dying God's sweet blood.'

Memories of his time in the company of the giant mason still haunted Nimander. It seemed he was cursed with occurrences devoid of resolution, every life crossing his path leaving a swirling wake of mysteries in which he flailed about, half drowning. The Jaghut, Gothos, only worsened matters, a creature of vast antiquity seeking to make use of them, somehow, for reasons he had been too uninterested to explain.

*Since we failed him.*

The smell of rotting salt filled the air and they could see the bleached flats stretching out from the old shoreline, stilted docks high and dry above struggling weeds, fisher boats lying on their sides farther out. Off to their left, inland, farmsteads were visible amidst rows of scarecrows, but it looked as if there was nothing still living out there – the plants were black and withered, the hundreds of wrapped figures motionless.

They drew closer to the archway, and still there was no one in sight.

'We're being watched,' Skintick said.

Nimander nodded. He felt the same. Hidden eyes, avid eyes.

'As if we've done just what they wanted,' Skintick went on, his voice low, 'by delivering Clip, straight to their damned Abject Temple.'

That was certainly possible. 'I have no intention of surrendering him – you know that.'

'So we prepare to wage war against an entire city? A fanatic priesthood and a god?'

'Yes.'

Grinning, Skintick loosened the sword at his side.

Nimander frowned at him. 'Cousin, I don't recall you possessing such bloodlust.'

'Oh, I am as reluctant as you, Nimander. But I feel we've been pushed long enough. It's time to push back, that's all. Still, that damage to your hands worries me.'

'Aranatha did what she could – I will be fine.' He did not explain how the wounding felt more spiritual than physical. Aranatha had indeed healed the crushed bones, the mangled flesh. Yet he still cradled them as if crippled, and in his dreams at night he found himself trapped in memories of that heavy block of obsidian sliding over his fingertips, the pain, the spurting blood – and he'd awaken slick with sweat, hands throbbing.

The very same hands that had strangled Phaed – almost taking her life. The pain felt like punishment, and now, in the city before them, he believed that once more they would know violence, delivering death with terrible grace.

They reined in before the gate's archway. Sigils crowded the wooden doors, painted in the same thick, black dye that marred the walls to either side.

Nenanda spoke from the wagon's bench. 'What are we waiting for? Nimander? Let's get this over with.'

Skintick twisted in the saddle and said, 'Patience, brother. We're waiting for the official welcoming party.

The killing will have to come later.'

Kallor climbed down from the back of the wagon and walked up to the gate. 'I hear singing,' he said.

Nimander nodded. The voices were distant, reaching them in faint waves rippling out from the city's heart. There were no other sounds, such as one would expect from a crowded, thriving settlement. And through the archway he could see naught but empty streets and the dull faces of blockish buildings, shutters closed on every window.

Kallor had continued on, into the shadow of the gate and then out to the wide street beyond, where he paused, his gaze fixed on something to his left.

'So much for the welcoming party,' Skintick said, sighing. 'Shall we enter, Nimander?'

From behind them came Aranatha's melodic voice. 'Be warned, cousins. This entire city is the Abject Temple.'

Nimander and Skintick both turned at that.

'Mother bless us,' Skintick whispered.

'What effect will that have on us?' Nimander asked her. 'Will it be the same as in the village that night?'

'No, nothing like that has awakened yet.' Then she shook her head. 'But it will come.'

'And can you defend us?' Nenanda asked.

'We will see.'

Skintick hissed under his breath and then said, 'Now that's reassuring.'

'Never mind,' Nimander replied. Wincing, he tightened his grip on the reins and with a slight pressure of his legs he guided his horse into the city.

The others lurched into motion behind him.

Coming to Kallor's side Nimander followed the old man's gaze down the side street and saw what had so captured his attention. The ruin of an enormous mechanism filled the street a hundred paces down. It seemed to have come from the sky, or toppled down from the roof of the building nearest the outer wall – taking most of the facing wall with it. Twisted iron filled its gaping belly, where flattened, riveted sheets had been torn away. Smaller pieces of the machine littered the cobbles, like fragments of armour, the iron strangely blue, almost gleaming.

'What in the Abyss is that?' Skintick asked.

'Looks K'Chain Che'Malle,' Kallor said. 'But they would offer up no gods, dying or otherwise. Now I am curious,' and so saying he bared his teeth in a smile not directed at anyone present – which was, Nimander decided, a good thing.

'Aranatha says the entire city is sanctified.'

Kallor glanced over. 'I once attempted that for an entire empire.'

Skintick snorted. 'With you as the focus of worship?'

'Of course.'

'And it failed?'

Kallor shrugged. 'Everything fails, eventually.' And he set out for a closer examination of the ruined machine.

'Even conversation,' muttered Skintick. 'Should we follow him?'

Nimander shook his head. 'Leave him. If the city is a temple, then there must be an altar – presumably somewhere in the middle.'

'Nimander, we could well be doing everything they want us to do, especially by bringing Clip to that altar. I think we should find an inn, somewhere to rest up. We can then reconnoitre and see what awaits us.'

He thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. 'Good idea. Lead the way, Skin, see what you can find.'

They continued on down the main street leading from the gate. The tenements looked lifeless, the shops on the ground level empty, abandoned. Glyphs covered every wall and door, spread out from every shuttered window to as far as a hand could reach if someone was leaning out. The writing seemed to record a frenzy of revelation, or madness, or both.

A half-dozen buildings along, Skintick found an inn, closed up like everything else, but he dismounted and approached the courtyard gates. A push swung them wide and Skintick looked back with a smile.

The wagon's hubs squealed in well-worn grooves in the frame of the gate as Nenanda guided it in. The compound beyond was barely large enough to accommodate a single carriage on its circular lane that went past, first, the stables, and then the front three-stepped entrance to the hostelry. A partly subterranean doorway to the left of the main doors probably led into the taproom. In the centre of the round was a stone-lined well – stuffed solid with bloating corpses.

Skintick's smile faded upon seeing this detail. Dead maggots ringed the well. 'Let's hope,' he said to Nimander, 'there's another pump inside . . . drawing from a different source.'

Nenanda had set the brake and he now dropped down, eyeing the bodies. 'Previous guests?'

'It's what happens when you don't pay up.'

Nimander dismounted and shot Skintick a warning look, but his cousin did not notice – or chose not to, for he then continued, 'Or all the beds were taken. Or some prohibition against drinking anything but kelyk – it clearly doesn't pay to complain.'

'Enough,' said Nimander. 'Nenanda, can you check the stables – see if there's feed and clean water. Skintick, let's you and I head inside.'

A spacious, well-furnished foyer greeted them, with a booth immediately to the right, bridged by a polished counter. The narrow panel door set in its back wall was shut. To the left was a two-sided cloakroom and beside that the sunken entranceway into the taproom. A corridor was directly ahead, leading to rooms, and a steep staircase climbed to the next level where, presumably, more rooms could be found. Heaped on the floor at the foot of the stairs was bedding, most of it rather darkly stained.

'They stripped the rooms,' observed Skintick. 'That was considerate.'

'You suspect they've prepared this place for us?'

'With bodies in the well and ichor-stained sheets? Probably. It's reasonable that we would stay on the main street leading in, and this was the first inn we'd reach.' He paused, looking round. 'Obviously, there are many ways of readying for guests. Who can fathom human cultures, anyway?'

Outside, Nenanda and the others were unpacking the wagon.

Nimander walked to the taproom entrance and ducked to look inside. Dark, the air thick with the pungent, bittersweet scent of kelyk. He could hear Skintick making his way up the stairs, decided to leave him to it. One step down, on to the sawdust floor. The tables and chairs had all been pushed to one side in a haphazard pile. In the open space left behind the floor was thick with stains and coagulated clumps that reminded Nimander of dung in a stall. Not dung, however; he knew that.

He explored behind the bar and found rows of dusty clay bottles and jugs, wine and ale. The beakers that had contained kelyk were scattered on the floor, some of them broken, others still weeping dark fluid.

The outer door swung open and Nenanda stepped inside, one hand on the grip of his sword. A quick look round, then he met Nimander's gaze and shrugged. 'Was you I heard, I guess.'

'The stables?'

'Well enough supplied, for a few days at least. There's a hand pump and spout over the troughs. The water smelled sour but otherwise fine – the horses didn't hesitate, at any rate.' He strode in. 'I think those bodies in the well, Nimander – dead of too much kelyk. I suspect that well was in fact dry. They just used it to dump the ones that died, as they died.'

Nimander walked back to the doorway leading into the foyer.

Desra and Kedeviss had carried Clip inside, setting him on the floor. Skintick was on the stairs, a few steps up from the mound of soiled bedding. He was leaning on one rail, watching as the two women attended to Clip. Seeing Nimander, he said, 'Nothing but cockroaches and bedbugs in the rooms. Still, I don't think we should use them – there's an odd smell up there, not at all pleasant.'

'This room should do,' Nimander said as he went over to look down at Clip. 'Any change?' he asked.

Desra glanced up. 'No. The same slight fever, the same shallow breathing.'

Aranatha entered, looked round, then went to the booth, lifted the hinged counter and stepped through. She tried the latch on the panel door and when it opened, she disappeared into the back room.

A grunt from Skintick. 'In need of the water closet?'

Nimander rubbed at his face, flexed his fingers to ease the ache, and then, as Nenanda arrived, he said, 'Skintick and I will head out now. The rest of you . . . well, we could run into trouble at any time. And if we do one of us will try to get back here—'

'If you run into trouble,' Aranatha said from the booth, 'we will know it.'

*Oh? How?* 'All right. We shouldn't be long.'

They had brought all their gear into the room and Nimander now watched as first Desra and then the other women began unpacking their weapons, their fine chain hauberks and mail gauntlets. He watched as they readied for battle, and said nothing as anguish filled him. None of this was right. It had never been right. And he could do nothing about it.

Skintick edged his way round the bedding and, with a tug on Nimander's arm, led him back outside. 'They will be all right,' he said. 'It's us I'm worried about.'

'Us? Why?'

Skintick only smiled.

They passed through the gate and came out on to the main street once more. The mid-afternoon heat made the air sluggish, enervating. The faint singing seemed to invite them into the city's heart. An exchanged glance; then, with a shrug from Skintick, they set out.

'That machine.'

'What about it, Skin?'

'Where do you think it came from? It looked as if it just . . . appeared, just above one of the buildings, and then dropped, smashing everything in its path, ending with itself. Do you recall those old pumps, the ones beneath Dreth Street in Malaz City? Withal found them in those tunnels he explored? Well, he took us on a tour—'

'I remember, Skin.'

'I'm reminded of those machines – all the gears and rods, the way the metal components all meshed so cleverly, ingeniously – I cannot imagine the mind that could think up such constructs.'

'What is all this about, Skin?'

'Nothing much. I just wonder if that thing is somehow connected with the arrival of the Dying God.'

'Connected how?'

'What if it was like a skykeep? A smaller version, obviously. What if the Dying God was *inside* it? Some accident brought it down, the locals pulled him out. What if that machine was a kind of throne?'

Nimander thought about that. A curious idea. Andarist had once explained that skykeeps – such as the one Anomander Rake claimed as his own – were not a creation of sorcery, and indeed the floating fortresses were held aloft through arcane manipulations of technology.

K'Chain Che'Malle, Kallor had said. Clearly, he had made the same connection as had Skintick.

'Why would a god need a machine?' Nimander asked.

'How should I know? Anyway, it's broken now.'

They came to a broad intersection. Public buildings commanded each corner, the architecture peculiarly utilitarian, as if the culture that had bred it was singularly devoid of creative flair. Glyphs made a mad scrawl on otherwise unadorned walls, some of the symbols now striking Nimander as resembling that destroyed mechanism.

The main thoroughfare continued on another two hundred paces, they could see, opening out on to an expansive round. At the far end rose the most imposing structure they had seen yet.

'There it is,' Skintick said. 'The Abject . . . altar. It's where the singing is coming from, I think.'

Nimander nodded.

'Should we take a closer look?'

He nodded again. 'Until something happens.'

'Does being attacked by a raving mob count?' Skintick asked.

Figures were racing into the round, threadbare but with weapons in their hands that they waved about over their heads, their song suddenly ferocious, as they began marching towards the two Tiste Andii.

'Here was I thinking we were going to be left alone,' Nimander said. 'If we run, we'll just lead them back to the inn.'

'True, but holding the gate should be manageable, two of us at a time, spelling each other.'

Nimander was the first to hear a sound behind him and he spun round, sword hissing from the scabbard.

Kallor.

The old warrior walked towards them. 'You kicked them awake,' he said.

'We were sightseeing,' said Skintick, 'and though this place is miserable we kept our opinions to ourselves. In any case, we were just discussing what to do now.'

'You could stand and fight.'

'We could,' agreed Nimander, glancing back at the mob. Now fifty paces away and closing fast. 'Or we could beat a retreat.'

'They're brave right now,' Kallor observed, stepping past and drawing his two-handed sword. As he walked he looped the plain, battered weapon over his head, a few passes, as if loosening up his shoulders. Suddenly he did not seem very old at all.

Skintick asked, 'Should we help him?'

'Did he ask for help, Skin?'

'No, you're right, he didn't.'

They watched as Kallor marched directly into the face of the mob.

And all at once that mob blew apart, people scattering, crowding out to the sides as the singing broke up into wails of dismay. Kallor hesitated for but a moment, before resuming his march. In the centre of a corridor now that had opened up to let him pass.

'He just wants to see that altar,' Skintick said, 'and he's not the one they're bothered with. Too bad,' he added, 'it might have been interesting to see the

old badger fight.'

'Let's head back,' Nimander said, 'while they're distracted.'

'If they let us.'

They turned and set off, at an even, unhurried pace. After a dozen or so strides Skintick half turned. He grunted, then said, 'They've left us to it. Nimander, the message seems clear. To get to that altar, we will have to go through them.'

'So it seems.'

'Things will get messy yet.'

Yes, they would.

'So, do you think Kallor and the Dying God will have a nice conversation? Observations on the weather. Reminiscing on the old tyrannical days when everything was all fun and games. Back when the blood was redder, its taste sweeter. Do you think?'

Nimander said nothing, thinking instead of those faces in that mob, the black stains smeared round their mouths, the pits of their eyes. Clothed in rags, caked with filth, few children among them, as if the kelyk made them all equal, regardless of age, regardless of any sort of readiness to manage the world and the demands of living. They drank and they starved and the present was the future, until death stole away that future. A simple trajectory. No worries, no ambitions, no dreams.

Would any of that make killing them easier? No.

'I do not want to do this,' Nimander said.

'No,' Skintick agreed. 'But what of Clip?'

'I don't know.'

'This kelyk is worse than a plague, because its victims invite it into their lives, and then are indifferent to their own suffering. It forces the question – have we any right to seek to put an end to it, to destroy it?'

'Maybe not,' Nimander conceded.

'But there is another issue, and that is mercy.'

He shot his cousin a hard look. 'We kill them all for their own good? Abyss take us, Skin—'

'Not them – of course not. I was thinking of the Dying God.'

Ah . . . well. Yes, he could see how that would work, how it could, in fact, make this palatable. If they could get to the Dying God without the need to slaughter hundreds of worshippers. 'Thank you, Skin.'

'For what?'

'We will sneak past them.'

'Carrying Clip?'

'Yes.'

'That won't be easy – it might be impossible, in fact. If this city is the temple, and the power of the Dying God grants gifts to the priests, then they will sense our approach no matter what we do.'

'We are children of Darkness, Skintick. Let us see if that still means something.'

Desra pulled her hand from Clip's brow. 'I was wrong. He's getting worse.' And she straightened and looked across to Aranatha. 'How are they?'

A languid blink. 'Coming back, unharmed.'

Something was wrong with Aranatha. Too calm, too . . . empty. Desra always considered her sister to be vapid – oh, she wielded a sword with consummate elegance, as cold a killer as the rest of them when necessity so demanded – but there was a kind of pervasive disengagement in Aranatha. Often descending upon her in the midst of calamity and chaos, as if the world in its bolder mayhem could bludgeon her senseless.

Making her unreliable as far as Desra was concerned. She studied Aranatha for a moment longer, their eyes meeting, and when her sister

smiled Desra answered with a scowl and turned to Nenanda. 'Did you find anything to eat in the taproom? Or drink?'

The warrior was standing by the front door, which he held open with one hand. At Desra's questions he glanced back. 'Plenty, as if they'd just left – or maybe it was a delivery, like the kind we got on the road.'

'Someone must be growing proper food, then,' said Kedeviss. 'Or arranging its purchase from other towns and the like.'

'They've gone to a lot of trouble for us,' Nenanda observed. 'And that makes me uneasy.'

'Clip is dying, Aranatha,' Desra said.

'Yes.'

'They're back,' Nenanda announced.

'Nimander will know what to do,' Desra pronounced.

'Yes,' said Aranatha.

She circled once, high above the city, and even her preternatural sight struggled against the eternal darkness below. Kurald Galain was a most alien warren, even in this diffused, weakened state. Passing directly over the slumbering mass of Silanah, Crone cackled out an ironic greeting. Of course there was no visible response from the crimson dragon, yet the Great Raven well knew that Silanah sensed her wheeling overhead. And no doubt permitted, in a flash of imagery, the vision of jaws snapping, bones and feathers crunching as delicious fluids spurted – Crone cackled again, louder this time, and was rewarded with a twitch of that long, serpentine tail.

She slid on to an updraught from the cliff's edge, then angled down through it on a steep dive towards the low-walled balcony of the keep.

He stood alone, something she had come to expect of late. The Son of Darkness was closing in, like an onyx flower as the bells of midnight rang on, chime by chime to the twelfth and last, and then there would be naught but echoes, until even these faded, leaving silence. She crooked her wings to slow her plummet, the keep still rushing up to meet her. A flurry of

beating wings and she settled atop the stone wall, talons crunching into the granite.

'And does the view ever change?' Crone asked.

Anomander Rake looked down, regarded her for a time.

She opened her beak to laugh in silence for a few heartbeats. 'The Tiste Andii are not a people prone to sudden attacks of joy, are they? Dancing into darkness? The wild cheerful cavort into the future? Do you imagine that our flight from his rotting flesh was not one of rapturous glee? Pleasure at being born, delight at being alive? Oh, I have run out of questions for you – it is indeed now a sad time.'

'Does Baruk understand, Crone?'

'He does. More or less. Perhaps. We'll see.'

'Something is happening to the south.'

She bobbed her head in agreement. 'Something, oh yes, something all right. Are the priestesses in a wild orgy yet? The plunge that answers *everything*! Or, rather, postpones the need for answers for a time, a time of corresponding bliss, no doubt. But then . . . reality returns. Damn reality, damn it to the Abyss! Time for another plunge!' 'Travel has soured your mood, Crone.'

'It is not in my nature to grieve. I despise it, in fact. I rail against it! My sphincter explodes upon it! And yet, what is it you force upon me, your old companion, your beloved servant?'

'I have no such intention,' he replied. 'Clearly, you fear the worst. Tell me, what have your kin seen?'

'Oh, they are scattered about, here and there, ever high above the petty machinations of the surface crawlers. We watch as they crawl this way and that. We watch, we laugh, we sing their tales to our sisters, our brothers.'

'And?'

She ducked her head, fixed one eye upon the tumultuous black seas below. 'This darkness of yours, Master, breeds fierce storms.'

'So it does.'

'I will fly high above the twisting clouds, into air clear and cold.'

'And so you shall, Crone, so you shall.'

'I dislike it when you are generous, Master. When that soft regard steals into your eyes. It is not for you to reveal compassion. Stand here, yes, unseen, unknowable, that I might hold this in my mind. Let me think of the ice of true justice, the kind that never shatters – listen, I hear the bells below! How sure that music, how true the cry of iron.'

'You are most poetic this day, Crone.'

'It is how Great Ravens rail at grief, Master. Now, what would you have me do?'

'Endest Silann is at the deep river.'

'Hardly alone, I should think.'

'He must return.'

She was silent for a moment, head cocked. Then she said, 'Ten bells have sounded.'

'Ten.'

'I shall be on my way, then.'

'Fly true, Crone.'

'I pray you tell your beloved the same, Master, when the time is nigh.'

He smiled. 'There is no need for that.'

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Who are you to judge whether she is old
or young, and if she is lifting the bucket
or lowering it down into this well?
And is she pretty or plain as undyed linen,
is she a sail riding the summer wind
bright as a maiden's eye above waves of blue?
Does her walk sway in pleasure and promise
of bracing dreams as if the earth could sing
fertile as joyous butterflies in a flowered field,
or has this saddle stretched slack in cascades
of ripe fruit and rides no more through
blossomed orchards? Who then are you
to cage in presumptuous iron the very
mystery that calls us to life where hovers
the brimming bucket, ever poised between
dark depths and choral sunlight – she is beauty
and this too is a criminal exhortation, and
nothing worthwhile is to be found in your
regard that does little more than stretch
this frayed rope – so shame!
Dismissal delivers vicious wounds and she
walks away or walks to with inner cringing.
Dare not speak of fairness, dare not indulge
cruel judgement when here I sit watching
and all the calculations between blinks
invite the multitude to heavy scorn and see
that dwindling sail passing for ever beyond you
as is her privilege there on the sea of flowers
all sweet fragrance swirling in her wake –
it will never *ever* reach you – and this is
balance, this is measure, this is the observance

of strangers who hide their tears
when turning away.

*Young Men Against a Wall*
Nekath of One Eye Cat

No purer artist exists or has ever existed than a child freed to imagine. This scattering of sticks in the dust, that any adult might kick through without a moment's thought, is in truth the bones of a vast world, clothed, fleshed, a fortress, a forest, a great wall against which terrible hordes surge and are thrown back by a handful of grim heroes. A nest for dragons, and these shiny smooth pebbles are their eggs, each one home to a furious, glorious future. No creation was ever raised as fulfilled, as brimming, as joyously triumphant, and all the machinations and manipulations of adults are the ghostly recollections of childhood and its wonders, the awkward mating to cogent function, reasonable purpose; and each façade has a tale to recount, a legend to behold in stylized propriety. Statues in alcoves fix sombre expressions, indifferent to every passer-by. Regimentation rules these creaking, stiff minds so settled in habit and fear.

To drive children into labour is to slaughter artists, to scour deathly all wonder, the flickering dart of imagination eager as finches flitting from branch to branch – all crushed to serve grown-up needs and heartless expectations. The adult who demands such a thing is dead inside, devoid of nostalgia's bright dancing colours, so smooth, so delicious, so replete with longing both sweet and bitter – dead inside, yes, and dead outside, too. Corpses in motion, cold with the resentment the undead bear towards all things still alive, all things still warm, still breathing.

Pity these ones? Nay, never, never so long as they drive on hordes of children into grisly labour, then sup languid of air upon the myriad rewards.

Dare this round self descend into hard judgement? This round self does dare! A world built of a handful of sticks can start tears in the eyes, as the artist on hands and knees sings a score of wordless songs, speaks in a hundred voices, and moves unseen figures across the vast panorama of the mind's canvas (pausing but once to wipe nose on sleeve). He does so dare this! And would hasten the demise of such cruel abuse.

Even a serpent has grandiose designs, yet must slither in minute increments, struggling for distances a giant or god would scorn. Tongue flicking for the scent, this way and that. Salvation is the succulent fruit at

hunt's end, the sun-warmed bird's egg, the soft cuddly rat trapped in the jaws.

So searches the serpent, friend to the righteous. So slides the eel through the world's stirred muck, whiskers a-probing. Soon, one hopes, soon!

Young Harllo was not thinking of justice, nor of righteous freedom, nor was he idly fashioning glittering worlds from the glistening veins of raw iron, or the flecks of gold in the midst of cold, sharp quartzite. He had no time to kneel in some overgrown city garden building tiny forts and reed bridges over run-off tracks left by yesterday's downpour. No, for Harllo childhood was over. Aged six.

At this moment, then, he was lying on a shelf of hard, black stone, devoured by darkness. He could barely hear the workers far above, although rocks bounced their way down the crevasse every now and then, echoing with harsh barks from the floor far below.

The last time here he had dangled from a rope, and there had been no careless rain of stones – any one of which could crush his skull. And on his descent back then, his outstretched arms had encountered no walls, leading him to believe the crevasse was vast, opening out perhaps into a cavern. This time, of course, there was no rope – Harllo should not even be here and would probably be switched once he was found out.

Bainisk had sent him back to Chuffs at shift's end. And that was where he ought now to be, hurriedly devouring his bowl of watery soup and husk of black bread, before stumbling off to his cot. Instead, he was climbing down this wall, without light to ensure that he would not be discovered by those working above.

Not a cavern after all. Instead, a pocked, sheer cliff-face – and those gaping holes were all oddly regular, rectangular, although not until Harllo reached this balcony ledge did he comprehend that he was climbing down the face of some buried building. He wanted to slip into one of these windows and explore, but he had promised to deliver *splints* to the Bone Miner below, and that was what he would do.

Careful questioning had led him to a definition of 'splints', but he could not find sticks suitable for the purpose of fixing the Miner's shattered legs. Either too feeble and small, or not straight enough; and besides, all the wood brought to the camp was too well guarded. Instead, he had gone to the tailings heaps, where all manner of garbage was thrown. Eyed suspiciously by the old women who'd sold children and grandchildren to the mine yet found they could not sever their ties – thus dooming themselves to this fringe-world at camp's edge – Harllo had picked through the rubbish.

Often, and especially from the run-off tunnels pumped through layers of sandstone, miners would find piles of bones from long-dead creatures. Bones heavy and solid and almost impossible to break. Skulls and the like were sold to collectors – scholars with squinty eyes and too much coin and time for their own good. The pieces already fractured off, broken up and forming a kind of gravel, went to the herbalists for their gardens and the mock-healers for potions and pastes – or so Bainisk called them, *mock-healers*, with a sneer – *ground-up bone's good only for constipation!* This left the oversized long bones – which for some reason were believed to be cursed.

Out on the heaps he found two that seemed to have been from the same kind of beast. After some examination and comparison, he confirmed that he had a right one and a left one. They were heavy, thick and ridged, and he hoped they would do.

Between shifts at the main tunnel there was a half-bell when no one was under rock, and Harllo, sweating beneath the weight of the bones, hurriedly carried them in; then, finding an abandoned side-passage, he stashed them along with some lengths of rope and leather laces. That had been before his shift, and now here he was, trying to do what he had promised.

Those long leg bones were strapped to his back. His neck and shoulders were raw from the ropes and more than once he had thought the swinging of the heavy bones would tug him away from the wall, but he had held on, this far at least.

And now, lying on this balcony ledge, Harllo rested.

If someone went looking for him and didn't find him, an alarm would be raised. Always two possibilities when someone went missing. Flight, or lost in the tunnels. Searches would set out in both directions, and some old woman would say how she saw him at the heaps, collecting bones and who knew what else. Then someone else would recall seeing Harllo carrying something back to the main tunnel mouth in between shifts – and Venaz would say that Harllo was clearly up to something, since he never came back for his meal. Something against the rules! Which would put Bainisk in a bad situation, since Bainisk had favoured him more than once. Oh, this was all a mistake!

Groaning, he slipped over the edge, cautious with his handholds, and resumed his journey down.

And, not two man-heights down from the balcony, his groping feet found another ledge, followed immediately by another – a staircase, angling steeply down the wall. One hand maintaining contact with the seamless stone, Harllo worked his way down, step by step.

He did not recall noticing any of this his first time down here. Of course, the candle light had been feeble – which made easier catching the glitter of gold and the like – and he had gone straight back to the rope. And hadn't his mind been awhirl? A talking Imass! Down here for maybe hundreds of years – with no one to talk to and nothing to look at, oh, how miserable that must have been.

So. He should not be resenting doing all this for the Bone Miner. A few switches to the back wasn't much to pay for this mercy.

He reached the floor and paused. So dark! 'Hello? It's me! Dev'ad Anan Tol, can you hear me?'

'I can. Follow, then, the sound of my voice. If such a thing is possible—'

'It is . . . I think. Scratch the rock you're sitting on – I'll feel that under my feet—'

'That,' said the Imass, 'is an impressive talent.'

'I'm good when I can't see. Vibrations, it's called.'

'Yes. Can you feel this then?'

'I'm getting closer, yes. I think I can start a lantern here. Shuttered so it won't spread out.' He crouched down, the ends of the long bones thunking behind him, and untied the small tin lantern from his belt. 'This one's called a pusher. You can fix it on to a pole and push it ahead. If the wick dims fast then you know it's bad air. Wait.' A moment later and soft golden light slanted like a path, straight to where sat the Bone Miner. Harllo grinned. 'See, I was almost there, wasn't I?'

'What is it that you carry, cub?'

'Your *splints*. And rope and string.'

'Let me see those . . . bones. Yes, give them to me—' And he reached out skeletal hands to grasp the splints as soon as Harllo came close enough. A low grating gasp from the Imass, then soft muttering. 'By the Shore of Jaghra Til, I had not thought to see . . . Cub, my tools . . . for this. The gift is not in balance.'

'I can try to find some better ones—'

'No, child. The imbalance is the other way. These are emlava, a male, his hind long bones. True, they twist and cant. Still . . . yes . . . possible.'

'Will they work as splints then?'

'No.'

Harllo sagged.

The Imass rumbled a low laugh. 'Ah, cub. Not splints.

No. *Legs.'*

'So you can walk again? Oh, I'm glad!'

'If indeed I was somehow caught in the Ritual of Tellann, yes, I think I can fashion . . . from these . . . why do you fret so, cub?'

'I had to sneak down here. If they find out I'm missing . . .'

'What will happen?'

'I might be beaten – not so much as to make me useless.

It won't be so bad.'

'You should go, then, quickly.'

Harllo nodded, yet still he hesitated. 'I found a building, a buried building. Was that where you lived?'

'No. It was a mystery even to the Jaghut Tyrant. Countless empty rooms, windows looking out upon nothing – blank rock, pitted sandstone. Corridors leading nowhere – we explored most of it, I recall, and found nothing. Do not attempt the same, cub. It is very easy to get lost in there.'

'I better go,' said Harllo. 'If I can come down here again—'

'Not at risk of your hide. Soon, perhaps, I will come to you.'

Harllo thought of the consternation such an event would bring, and he smiled. A moment later he shuttered the lantern and set off for the stairs.

From sticks a fortress, a forest, a great wall. From sticks, a giant, rising up in the darkness, and to look into the pits of its eyes is to see twin tunnels into rock, reaching down and down, reaching back and back, to the very bones of the earth.

And so he rises, to look upon you – Harllo imagines this but none of it in quite this way. Such visions and their deadly promise belong to the adults of the world. To answer what's been done. What's been done.

And in the city every building wears a rictus grin, or so it might seem, when the stone, brick, plaster and wood breathe in the gloom of dusk, and the gas lanterns are yet to be set alight, and all the world is ebbing with shadows drawing together to take away all certainty. The city, this artifice of cliffs and caves, whispers of madness. Figures scurry for cover, rats and worse peer out curious and hungry, voices grow raucous in taverns and other fiery sanctuaries.

Is this the city of the day just past? No, it is transformed, nightmare-tinged, into a netherworld so well suited to the two figures walking – with comfort and ease – towards the gate of an estate. Where stand two guards,

nervous, moments from warning the strangers off – for the Lady of the House was in residence and she valued her privacy, yes, she did. Or so it must be assumed, and Scorch and Leff, having discussed the matter at length, were indeed convinced that, being a Lady, she valued all those things few others could afford, including . . . er, privacy.

They held crossbows because who could say what might creep into view and besides, the heavy weapons were so comforting to cradle when clouds devoured the stars and the moon had forgotten to rise and the damned lanterns still weren't lit. True enough, torches in sconces framed the arched gateway but this did little more than blind the two guards to the horrors lurking just beyond the pool of light.

Two such horrors drew closer. One was enormous, broad-shouldered and oddly short-legged, his hair shaggy as a yak's. He was smiling – or, that is, his teeth gleamed and perhaps it was indeed a smile, perhaps not. His companion was almost as tall, but much thinner, almost skeletal. Bald, the high dome of his forehead bore a tattooed scene of some sort within an elaborate oval frame of threaded gold stitched through the skin. His teeth, also visible, were all capped in silver-tipped gold, like a row of fangs. He wore a cloak of threadbare linen so long it dragged behind him, while his looming companion was dressed like a court jester – bright greens, oranges and reds and yellows – and these were just the colours of his undersized vest. He wore a billowy blouse of sky-blue silk beneath the vest, the cuffs of the sleeves stiff and reaching halfway between wrist and elbow. A shimmering black kerchief encircled his ox-like neck. He wore vermilion pantaloons drawn tight just beneath the knees, and calf-high snug moccasins.

'I think,' muttered Scorch, 'I'm going to be sick.'

'Stop there!' Leff barked. 'State your business if you have any – but know this, the Mistress is seeing no one.'

'Excellent!' said the huge one in a thunderous voice. 'There will be no delay then in her granting us audience. If you please, O orange-eyed one, do inform the Mistress that Lazan Door and Madrun have finally arrived, at her service.'

Leff sneered, but he was wishing that Torvald Nom hadn't gone off for supper or a roll with his wife or whatever, so he could pass all this on to him and not have to worry about it any more. Standing here at the gate, yes, that was within his abilities. 'Train your weapon on 'em, Scorch,' he said. 'I'll go find the castellan.'

Scorch shot him a look of raw terror. 'There's two, Leff, but only one quarrel! Leave me yours.'

'Fine, but I'd like to see you get two off with them only ten paces away. If they rushed you, why, you'd be lucky to get just one off.'

'Still, it'll make me feel better.'

'Now now, gentlemen,' the big one said, all too smoothly, 'there's no need for concern. I assure you, we are expected. Is this not the estate of Lady Varada? I do believe it is.'

'Varada?' hissed Scorch to Leff. 'Is that her name?'

'Shut it,' Leff snapped under his breath. 'You're making us look like idiots!' He carefully set his crossbow down and drew out the gate key. 'Nobody move unless it's to go away – not you, Scorch! Stay right there. I'll be right back.'

After Leff slipped out of sight, closing and locking the gate behind him, Scorch faced the two strangers once more. He managed a smile. 'Nice get-up, that,' he said to the jester. 'You a court clown or something? Sing us a song. How 'bout a riddle? I ain't any good at riddles but I like hearing 'em and the way when I do my thinking, trying to figure 'em out, my whole brain just goes white, sorta. Can you juggle? I like juggling, tried it once, got up to two at a time – that took weeks, let me tell you. Weeks. Juggling demands discipline all right, and maybe it looks easier to other people, but you and I know, well, just how talented you have to be to do it. Do you dance, too, or stand on your head—'

'Sir,' the giant cut in, 'I am not a jester. Nor a juggler. Nor a riddler, nor singer, nor dancer.'

'Oh. Colour-blind?'

'Excuse me?'

'The guard,' said the other man, the thin one, in a voice even thinner, 'has misconstrued your attire, Madrun. Local fashion is characteristically mundane, unimaginative. Did you not so observe earlier?'

'So I did. Of course. A clash of cultures—'

'Just so!' cried Scorch. 'Your clothes, yes, a clash of cultures all right – good way of describing it. You a puppetmaster, maybe? I like puppet shows, the way they look so lifelike, even the ones with wrinkled apples for heads—'

'Not a puppeteer, alas,' cut in Madrun with a heavy sigh.

The gate creaked open behind Scorch and he turned to see Leff and Studlock step through. The castellan floated past and hovered directly in front of the two strangers.

'Well, you two took your time!'

Madrun snorted. 'You try digging your way out of a collapsed mountain, Studious. Damned earthquake came from nowhere—'

'Not quite,' said Studlock. 'A certain hammer was involved. I admit, in the immediate aftermath I concluded that never again would I see your miser—your memorable faces. Imagine my surprise when I heard from a caravan merchant that—'

'Such rumours,' interjected the one Scorch rightly assumed was named Lazan Door, 'whilst no doubt egregiously exaggerated and so potentially entertaining, can wait, yes? Dear Studious, who dreamed of never again seeing our pretty faces, you have a new Mistress, and she is in need of compound guards. And, as we are presently under-employed, why, destinies can prove seamless on occasion, can't they?'

'So they can, Lazan. Yes, compound guards. You see, we have gate guards already. And a captain as well, who is presently elsewhere. Now, if you two will follow me, we can meet the Mistress.'

'Excellent,' said Madrun.

Scorch and Leff moved well aside as the trio filed in through the gate. Leff then locked it and turned to Scorch.

'We never got no audience with the Mistress!'

'We been snubbed!'

Leff collected his crossbow again. 'It's because we're on the lowest rung, that's why. The lowest . . . again! And here we thought we were climbing! Sure, Tor did some climbing, captain and all. But look at us – not even compound guards and we got here first!'

'Well,' said Scorch, 'if we'd a known there was a difference – gate and compound – we would've pushed for that, right? We was ill-informed – look at you, after all.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You got orange eyes, Leff!'

'That was a different kind of ill-informed.'

'That's what you think.'

'If you're so smart, Scorch, you coulda asked about being compound guards!'

'If it was just me, I would have!'

'If it was just you, Studlock never would've hired you at all, except maybe to clean out the latrines!'

'At least then I'd be *inside* the gate!'

Well, he had a point there. Leff sighed, stared out on the street. 'Look, there's the lantern crew.'

'Let's shoot 'em!'

'Sure, if you want us to get fired, Scorch, is that what you want?'

'I was only joking, Leff.'

There were looks that killed, and then there were looks that conducted torture. Excoriating skin with incremental, exquisite slices that left blood welling to the surface. That plucked eyeballs and pulled until all the tendons stretched, upon which those long wet ligaments were knotted together so that both eyes sat on the bridge of the nose. Torture, yes, delivered in cold pleasure, in clinical regard.

It was hardly surprising, then, that Torvald Nom devoured his supper in haste, forgetting to chew, and so was now afflicted with terrible indigestion, struggling to keep from groaning as he helped Tiserra clean the plates and whatnot; and the ominous silence stretched on, even as she cast sidelong looks of blood-curdling excision all unconvincingly dressed up as companionable, loving glances.

It was time to return to the estate for the evening. These precious deadly moments of domestic tranquillity – fraught as all such moments were with all that was left unspoken, the topics unbidden yet ever lurking, the hidden pitfalls and explosive nuances or even more explosive lack thereof – why, they had to come, alas, to an end, as considerations of career and professional responsibility returned once more to the fore.

'My sweet, I must leave you now.'

'Oh, must you?'

'Yes. Until midnight, but don't feel the need to wait up.'

'I've had a busy day. Two new orders. I doubt I'll be awake when you return, darling.'

'I'll try to be quiet.'

'Of course you will.'

Perfunctory kiss.

Just so, the pleasant exchanges to conclude the repast just past, but of course such words were the flourishes of feint and cunning sleight of hand. Beneath the innocence, Torvald well understood, there was this: 'My sweet, I will run not walk back to the estate now.'

'Oh, your stomach is upset? Let's hope you heave all over your two gate guards when you get there.'

'Yes. And suddenly it'll be midnight and like a doomed man I will count the steps to the gallows awaiting me at home. Pray to Beru and every other ascendant the world over that you're asleep when I get here, or at least feigning sleep.'

'I've had a busy day, husband, just thinking of all the things I'd like to do to you for breaking that promise. And when you get home, why, I'll be dreaming dreadful scenes, each one adding to that pleasant smile on my slumbering visage.'

'I shall attempt to sleep on no more than a hand's span of bed, stiff as a planed board, not making a sound.'

'Yes, you will. Darling.'

And the perfunctory kiss, smooch smooch.

Blue light painted the streets through which Torvald Nom now hurried along, blue light and black thoughts, a veritable bruising of dismay, and so the buildings to each side crowded, leaned in upon him, until he felt he was squirting – like an especially foul lump of excrement – through a sewer pipe. Terrible indeed, a wife's disappointment and, mayhap, disgust.

The princely wages were without relevance. The flexible shifts could barely earn a begrudging nod. The sheer impressive legality of the thing yielded little more than a sour grunt. And even the fact that Torvald Nom now held the title of Captain of the House Guard, while Scorch and Leff were but underlings among a menagerie of underlings (yes, he had exaggerated somewhat), had but granted him a temporary abeyance of the shrill fury he clearly deserved – and it waited, oh, it waited. He knew it. She knew it. And he knew she was holding on to it, like a giant axe, poised above his acorn of a head.

Yes, he'd given up slavery for this.

Such was the power of love, the lure of domestic tranquillity and the fending off of lonely solitude. Would he have it any other way?

Ask him later.

Onward, and there before him the estate's modest but suitably maintained wall, and the formal gate entranceway, its twin torches flaring and flickering, enough to make the two shapes of his redoubtable underlings look almost . . . attentive.

Not that either of them was watching the street. Instead, it seemed they were arguing.

'Stay sharp there, you two!' Torvald Nom said in his most stentorian voice, undermined by the punctuation of a loud, gassy belch.

'Gods, Tor's drunk!'

'I wish. Supper didn't agree with me. Now, what's your problem? I heard you two snapping and snarling from the other side of the street.'

'We got two new compound guards,' said Leff.

'Compound guards? Oh, you mean guarding the compound—'

'That's what I said. What else do compound guards guard if not compounds? Captains should know that kind of stuff, Tor.'

'And I do. It's just the title confused me. Compound needs guarding, yes, since the likelihood of someone getting past you two is so . . . likely. Well. So, you've met them? What are they like?'

'They're friends of Studlock – who they call Studious,' said Scorch, his eyes widening briefly before he looked away and squinted. 'Old friends, from under some mountain.'

'Oh,' said Torvald Nom.

'That collapsed,' Scorch added.

'The friendship? Oh, the mountain, you mean. It collapsed.'

Leff stepped closer and sniffed. 'You sure you're not drunk, Tor?'

'Of course I'm not drunk! Scorch is talking a lot of rubbish, that's all.'

'Rubble, not rubbish.'

'Like that, yes! Oh, look, Leff, just open the damned gate, will you? So I can meet the new compound guards.'

'Look for them in the compound,' Scorch advised.

Oh, maybe his wife was right, after all. Maybe? Of course she was. These two were idiots and they were also his friends and what did that say about Torvald Nom? No, don't think about that. *Besides, she's already done the necessary thinking about that, hasn't she?*

Torvald hastened through the gateway. Two strides into the compound and he halted. *Studious? Studious Lock? The Landless? Studious Lock the Landless, of One Eye Cat?*

'Ah, Captain, well timed. Permit me to introduce our two new estate guards.'

Torvald flinched as Studlock drifted towards him. Hood, mask, eerie eyes, all bound up in rags to cover up what had been done to him back in his adopted city – yes, but then, infamy never stayed hidden for long, did it? 'Ah, good evening, Castellan.' This modest, civil greeting was barely managed, croaking out from an all too dry mouth. And he saw, with growing trepidation, the two figures trailing in Studlock's wake.

'Captain Torvald Nom, this gaily clad gentleman is Madrun, and his ephemerally garbed companion is Lazan Door. Both hail from the north and so have no local interests that might conflict with their loyalties – a most important requirement, as you have been made aware, for Lady Varada of House Varada. Now, I have seen to their kit and assigned quarters. Captain, is something wrong?'

Torvald Nom shook his head. Then, before he could think – before his finely honed sense of propriety could kick in – he blurted out: 'But where are their masks?'

The shaggy haired giant frowned. 'Oh,' he said, 'that is most unfortunate. Reassure me once more, Studious, please.'

The castellan's pause was long, and then one rag-tied hand fluttered. 'Reputations, alas, are what they are, Madrun. Evidently, our captain here has travelled some. One Eye Cat? Let us hope he never wandered close to that foul, treacherous den of thieves, murderers and worse—'

'Never been there,' Torvald Nom said, hastily, licking his lips. 'But the tales of the, er, the ones hired to oust the Malazan Fist . . . and, er, what happened afterwards—'

'Outrageous lies,' said Lazan Door in his breathy, wispy voice, 'such as are invariably perpetrated by those with a vested interest in the illusion of righteousness. All lies, Captain. Foul, despicable, ruinous lies. I assure you we completed our task, even unto pursuing the Fist and his cadre into the very heart of a mountain—'

'You and Madrun Badrun, you mean. Studious Lock, on the other hand, was . . .' And only then did Torvald Nom decide that he probably shouldn't be speaking, probably shouldn't be revealing quite the extent of his knowledge. 'The tale I heard,' he added, 'was garbled, second and maybe even third hand, a jumble of details and who can separate truth from fancy in such things?'

'Who indeed,' said the castellan with another wave of one hand. 'Captain, we must trust that the subject of our past misadventures will not arise again, in any company and in particular that of our two intrepid gate guards.'

'The subject is now and for ever more closed,' affirmed Torvald Nom. 'Well, I'd best get to my office. To work on, um, shift scheduling – it seems we now have our night shift pretty much filled. As for the daytime—'

'As stated earlier,' cut in the castellan, 'the necessity for armed vigilance during the day is simply non-existent. Risk assessment and so forth. No, Captain, we have no need for more guards. Four will suffice.'

'Good, that will make scheduling easier. Now, it was a pleasure meeting you, Lazan Door, Madrun Badrun.' And, with disciplined march, Torvald Nom crossed the compound, making for his tiny office in the barracks annexe. Where he shut the flimsy door and sat down in the chair behind the

desk which, in order to reach it, demanded that he climb over the desk itself. Slumping down, hands holding up his head, he sat. Sweating.

Was Lady Varada aware of any of this . . . this background, back there where the ground still steamed with blood and worse? Well, she'd hired Studlock, hadn't she? But that didn't mean anything, did it? He'd crunched down his name, and even that name wasn't his real name, just something the idiots in One Eye Cat gave him, same as Madrun Badrun. As for Lazan Door, well, that one might be real, original even. And only one of them was wearing a mask and that mask was some local make, generic, not painted with any relevant sigils or whatever. So, she might not know a thing! She might be completely blind, unsuspecting, unaware, unprepared, uneverything!

He climbed back over his desk, straightened and smoothed out his clothing as best he could. It shouldn't be so hard, the captain seeking audience with the Mistress. Perfectly reasonable. Except that the official route was through the castellan, and that wouldn't do. No, he needed to be cleverer than that. In fact, he needed to . . . *break in*.

More sweat, sudden, chilling him as he stood between the desk and the office door, a span barely wide enough to turn round in.

So, Lazan Door and Madrun Badrun would be patrolling the compound. And Studious Lock the Landless, well, he'd be in his own office, there on the main floor. Or even in his private chambers, sitting there slowly unravelling or undressing or whatever one wanted to call it.

There was a window on the back wall of the annexe. Plain shutters and simple inside latch. From there he could clamber on to the roof, which was close enough to the side wall of the main building to enable him to leap across and maybe find a handhold or two, and then he could scramble up to the next and final level, where dwelt the Lady. It was still early so she wouldn't be asleep or in any particular state of undress.

Still, how would she react to her captain's intruding so on her privacy? Well, he could explain he was testing the innermost security of the estate (and, in finding it so lacking, why, he could press for hiring yet more

guards. Normal, reasonable, sane guards this time. No mass murderers. No sadists. No one whose humanness was questionable and open to interpretation. He could, then, provide a subtle counterbalance to the guards they already had).

It all sounded very reasonable, and diligent, as befitted a captain.

He worked his way round and opened the office door. Leaned out to make sure the barracks remained empty – of course it did, they were out there guarding things! He padded across to the back window. Unlatched it and eased out the shutters. Another quick, darting look, outside this time. Estate wall not ten paces opposite. Main building to his left, stables to his right. Was this area part of their rounds? It certainly should be. Well, if he moved fast enough, right this moment—

Hitching himself up on to the window sill, Torvald Nom edged out and reached up for the eaves-trough. He tested his weight on it and, satisfied at the modest creak, quickly pulled himself up and on to the sloped roof. Reached back down and carefully closed the shutters.

He rolled on to his back and waited. He'd wait, yes, until the two monsters tramped past.

The clay tiles dug into his shoulder blades. Was that the scuff of boots? Was that the whisper of linen sweeping the cobbles? Was that – no, it wasn't, he wasn't hearing a damned thing. Where had his damned compound guards gone? He sat up, crept his way to the peak of the roof. Peered out on to the grounds – and there they were, playing dice against the wall to one side of the gate.

He could fire them for that! Why, even Studlock wouldn't be able to—

And there *he* was, Studious himself, floating across towards his two cohorts. And his voice drifted back to Torvald Nom.

'Any change in the knuckles, Lazan?'

'Oh yes,' the man replied. 'Getting worse. Options fast diminishing.'

'How unfortunate.'

Madrun Badrun grunted and then said, 'We had our chance. Go north or go south. We should've gone north.'

'That would not work, as you well know,' said Studious Lock. 'Where are your masks?'

Lazan Door flung the bone dice against the wall again, bent to study the results.

'We tossed 'em,' answered Madrun.

'Make new ones.'

'We don't want to, Studious, we really don't.'

'That goes without saying, but it changes nothing.'

Oh, Torvald suspected he could crouch here and listen to the idiots all night. Instead, he needed to take advantage of their carelessness. He eased back down the slope of the roof, lifted himself into a crouch, and eyed the main building – and, look, a balcony. Well, that wasn't wise, was it?

Now, could he make the leap without making any noise? Of course he could – he'd been a thief for years, a successful thief, too, if not for all the arrests and fines and prison time and slavery and the like. He paused, gauging the distance, deciding which part of the rail he'd reach for, then launched himself across the gap.

Success! And virtually no noise at all. He dangled for a moment, then pulled himself on to the balcony. It was narrow and crowded with clay pots snarled with dead plants. Now, he could work the locks and slip in on this floor, taking the inside route to the level above. That would be simplest, wouldn't it? Riskier scaling the outside wall, where a chance glance from any of the three fools still jabbering away just inside the gate might alight upon him. And the last thing he wanted was to see any of them draw swords (not that he recalled seeing them wearing any).

He tested the balcony door. Unlocked! Oh, things would indeed have to change. Why, he could just saunter inside and find himself—

'Please, Captain, take a seat.'

She was lounging in a plush chair, barely visible in the dark room. Veiled? Yes, veiled. Dressed in some long loose thing, silk perhaps. One long-fingered hand, snug in a grey leather glove, held a goblet. There was a matching chair opposite her.

'Pour yourself some wine – yes, there on the table. The failure of that route, from the roof of the annexe, is that the roof is entirely visible from the window of any room on this side of the house. I assume, Captain, you were either testing the security of the estate, or that you wished to speak with me in private. Any other alternatives, alas, would be unfortunate.'

'Indeed, Mistress. And yes, I was testing . . . things. And yes,' he added as, summoning as much aplomb as he could manage, he went over to pour himself a goblet full of the amber wine, 'I wished to speak with you in private. Concerning your castellan and the two new compound guards.'

'Do they seem . . . excessive?'

'That's one way of putting it.'

'I would not want to be discouraging.'

He sat down. 'Discouraging, Mistress?'

'Tell me, are my two gate guards as incompetent as they appear to be?'

'That would be quite an achievement, Mistress.'

'It would, yes.'

'It may surprise you,' Torvald Nom said, 'but they actually possess a nasty streak. And considerable experience. They have been caravan guards, enforcers, Guild thugs and bounty hunters. It's the formality of this present job that has them so . . . awkward. They will adjust in time.'

'Not too well, I hope.'

All right, Torvald Nom decided, she was talking about something and he had no idea what that something was. 'Mistress, regarding Studlock, Lazan and Madrun—'

'Captain, I understand you are estranged from House Nom. That is unfortunate. I always advise that such past errors be mended whenever possible. Reconciliation is essential to well-being.'

'I will give that some thought, Mistress.'

'Do so. Now, please make your way out using the stairs. Inform the castellan that I wish to speak to him – no, there will be no repercussions regarding your seeking a private conversation with me. In fact, I am heartened by your concern. Loyalty was ever the foremost trait of the family Nom. Oh, now, do finish your wine, Captain.'

He did, rather quickly. Then walked over and locked the balcony doors. A bow to Lady Varada, and then out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. A moment to figure out where the stairs were, and, feeling slightly numbed – was it the wine? No, it wasn't the wine – he descended to the ground floor and out through the formal entrance, striding across the compound to where stood the castellan and his two friends.

'Castellan Studlock,' Torvald Nom called out, pleased to see how all three looked up guiltily from their game. 'The Mistress wishes to see you immediately.'

'Oh? Of course. Thank you, Captain.'

Torvald watched him flit away, and then turned to Lazan Door and Madrun. 'Interesting technique you have here. I feel the need to describe your duties, since it appears the castellan forgot to. You are to patrol the compound, preferably at random intervals, employing a variety of routes to ensure that you avoid predictability. Be especially mindful of unlit areas, although I do not recommend you carry torches or lanterns. Any questions?'

Madrun was smiling. He bowed. 'Sound instruction, Captain, thank you. We shall commence our duties immediately. Lazan, collect up your scrying dice. We must attend to the necessary formalities of diligent patrol.'

*Scrying dice? Gods below.* 'Is it wise,' he asked, 'to rely upon the hoary gods to determine the night's flavour?'

Lazan Door cleared his throat then bared his metal fangs. 'As you say, Captain. Divination is ever an imprecise science. We shall be sure to avoid relying overmuch on such things.'

'Er, right. Good, well, I'll be in my office, then.'

'Again,' Madrun said, his smile broadening.

There was, Torvald decided as he walked away, nothing pleasant about that smile. About either of their smiles, in fact. Or anything else about those two. Or Studious Lock, for that matter – *Blood Drinker, Bile Spitter, Poisoner, oh, they had so many names for that one. How soon before he earns a few more? And Madrun Badrun? And Lazan Door? What is Lady Varada up to?*

Never mind, never mind. He had an office, after all. And once he crawled over the desk and settled down in the chair, why, he felt almost important.

The sensation lasted a few heartbeats, which was actually something of an achievement. Any few precious moments, yes, of not thinking about those three. Any at all.

*Make new masks – now why should they do that? Renegade Seguleh are renegade – they can't ever go back. Supposedly, but then, what do any of us really know about the Seguleh? Make new masks, he said to them. Why?*

*What's wrong with normal advice? Wash that robe, Lazan Door, before the spiders start laying eggs. Choose no more than two colours, Madrun, and not ones that clash. Please. And what's with those moccasins?*

*Masks? Never mind the masks.*

His stomach gurgled and he felt another rise of bilious gas. *'Always chew your food, Tor, why such a hurry? There's plenty of daylight left to play. Chew, Tor, chew! Nice and slow, like a cow, yes. This way nothing will disagree with you. Nothing disagrees with cows, after all.'*

So true, at least until the axe swings down.

He sat in his office, squeezed in behind the desk, in a most disagreeable state.

'She's poisoning him, is my guess.'

Scorch stared, as if amazed at such a suggestion. 'Why would she do that?'

'Because of you,' said Leff. 'She hates you, Scorch, because of the way you always got Tor into trouble, and now she thinks you're going to do it all over again, so that's why she's poisoning him.'

'That don't make any sense. If she was worried she wouldn't be killing him!'

'Not killing, just making sickly. You forget, she's a witch, she can do things like that. Of course, she'd do better by poisoning you.'

'I ain't touching nothing she cooks, that's for sure.'

'It won't help if she decides you're better off dead, Scorch. Gods, I am so glad I'm not you.'

'Me too.'

'What?'

'I'd have orange eyes and that'd be awful because then we'd both have orange eyes so looking at each other would be like looking at yourself, which I have to do all the time anyway but imagine double that! No thanks, is what I say.'

'Is that what you say?'

'I just said it, didn't I?'

'I don't know. I don't know what you just said, Scorch, and that's the truth.'

'Good, since what I had to say wasn't meant for you anyway.'

Leff looked round and no, he didn't see anyone else. Of course he didn't, there was no point in looking.

'Besides,' said Scorch, 'you're the one who's been poisoned.'

'It wasn't no poison, Scorch. It was a mistake, a misdiagnosis. And it's fading—' 'No it ain't.'

'Yes. It is.'

'No. It ain't.'

'I'd stop saying that if I was you—'

'Don't start that one again!'

Blessed fates! Leave them to it, thy round self begs! The night stretches on, the city wears its granite grin and shadows dance on the edge of darkness. Late-night hawkers call out their wares, their services both proper and dubious. Singers sing and the drunk drink and thieves do their thieving and mysteries thrive wherever you do not belong and that, friends, is the hard truth.

Like rats we skitter away from the pools of light, seeking other matters, other scenes both tranquil and foul.

Follow, oh, follow me!

Benefactor of all things cosmopolitan, bestower of blessings upon all matters human and humane (bless their hearts both squalid and generous, bless their dreams and bless their nightmares, bless their fears and their loves and their fears of love and love of fears and bless, well, bless their shoes, sandals, boots and slippers and to walk in each, in turn, ah, such wonders! Such peculiar follies!), Kruppe of Darujhistan walked the Great Avenue of sordid acquisitiveness, casting a most enormous, indeed gigantic shadow that rolled sure as a tide past all these shops and their wares, past the wary eyes of shop owners, past the stands of fruit and succulent pastries, past the baskets of berries and the dried fish and the strange leafy things some people ate believing themselves to be masticators of wholesomeness, past the loaves of bread and rounds of cheese, past the vessels of wine and liquors in all assorted sizes, past the weavers and dressmakers, past the crone harpist with nubs for fingers and only three strings left on her harp and her song about the peg and the hole and the honey on the nightstand – ducking the flung coins and so quickly past! – and the bolts of cloth going nowhere and the breeches blocking the doorway and the shirts for men-at-arms and shoes for the soulless and the headstone makers and urn-pissers and the old thrice-divorced man who tied knots for a living with a gaggle of

children in tow surely bound by blood and thicker stuff. Past the wax-drippers and wick-twisters, the fire-eaters and ashcake-makers, past the prostitutes – oozing each languorous step with smiles of appreciation and fingers all aflutter and unbidden mysterious sensations of caresses in hidden or at least out-of-reach places and see eyes widen and appreciation flood through like the rush of lost youth and princely dreams and they sigh and call out *Kruppe, you darling man! Kruppe, ain't you gonna pay for that? Kruppe, marry every one of us and make us honest women! Kruppe* – rushing quickly past, now, aaii, frightening prospect to imagine! A bludgeon of wives (surely that must be the plural assignation)! A prattle of prostitutes!

Past this gate, thank the gods, and into the tunnel and out again and now civilization loomed austere and proper and this bodacious shadow strode alone, animated in its solitude, and yet this moment proved ample time to partake of past passages through life itself.

Out from one sleeve a berry-studded pastry, a ripe pompfruit, and a flask of minty wine; out from the other a new silver dinner knife with the Varada House monogram (my, where did this come from?), the polished blade – astonishing! – already glistening with a healthy dollop of butter streaked with honey – and so many things crowding these ample but nimble hands but see how one thing after another simply *vanishes* into inviting mouth and appreciative palate as befitting all culinary arts when the subtle merging of flavours yielded exquisite masterpiece – butter, honey, and – oh! – jam, and pastry and cheese and fruit and smoked eel – agh! Voluminous sleeve betrays self! Wine to wash away disreputable (and most cruel) taste.

Hands temporarily free once more, to permit examination of new shirt, array of scented candles, knotted strings of silk, handsome breeches and gilt-threaded sandals soft as any one of Kruppe's four cheeks, and here a kid-gut condom – gods, where did that come from? Well, an end to admiration of the night's most successful shopping venture, and if that crone discovered but two strings left on her harp, well, imagine how the horse felt! Standing now, at last, before most austere of austere estates. The gate creaked open, inviting invitation and so invited Kruppe invited himself in.

Steps and ornate formal entranceway and corridor and more steps these ones carpeted and wending upward and another corridor and now the dark-stained door and – oh, fling aside those wards, goodness – inside.

'How did you – never mind. Sit, Kruppe, make yourself comfortable.'

'Master Baruk is so kind, Kruppe shall do as bid, with possibly measurable relief does he so *oof!* into this chair and stretch out legs, yes they are indeed stretched out, the detail subtle. Ah, an exhausting journey, Baruk beloved friend of Kruppe!'

A toad-like obese demon crawled up to nest at his feet, snuffling. Kruppe produced a strip of dried eel and offered it. The demon sniffed, then gingerly accepted the morsel.

'Are things truly as dire as I believe, Kruppe?'

Kruppe waggled his brows. 'Such journeys leave self puckered with dryness, gasping with thirst.'

Sighing, the High Alchemist said, 'Help yourself.'

Beaming a smile, Kruppe drew out from a sleeve a large dusty bottle, already uncorked. He examined the stamp on the dark green glass. 'My, your cellar is indeed well equipped!' A crystal goblet appeared from the other sleeve. He poured. Downed a mouthful then smacked his lips. 'Exquisite!'

'Certain arrangements have been finalized,' said Baruk.

'Most impressive, Baruk friend of Kruppe. How can such portentous events be measured, one wonders. If one was the wondering type. Yet listen – the buried gate creaks, dust sifts down, stones groan! Humble as we are, can we hope to halt such inevitable inevitabilities? Alas, time grinds on. All fates spin and not even the gods can guess how each will topple. The moon itself rises uncertain on these nights. The stars waver, rocks fall upward, wronged wives forgive and forget – oh, this is a time for miracles!'

'And is that what we need, Kruppe? Miracles?'

'Each moment may indeed seem in flux, chaotic and fraught, yet – and Kruppe knows this most surely – when all is set out, moment upon moment, then every aberration is but a modest crease, a feeble fold, a crinkled memento. The great forces of the universe are as a weight-stone upon the fabric of our lives. Rich and poor, modest and ambitious, generous and greedy, honest and deceitful, why, all is flattened! Splat! Crunch, smear, ooze! What cares Nature for jewelled crowns, coins a-stacked perilously high, great estates and lofty towers? Kings and queens, tyrants and devourers – all are as midges on the forehead of the world!'

'You advise an extended perspective. That is all very well, from an historian's point of view, and in retrospect. Unfortunately, Kruppe, to those of us who must live it, in the midst, as it were, it provides scant relief.'

'Alas, Baruk speaks true. Lives in, lives out. The sobs of death are the sodden songs of the world. So true, so sad. Kruppe asks this: witness two scenes. In one, an angry, bitter man beats another man to death in an alley in the Gadrobi District. In the other, a man of vast wealth conspires with equally wealthy compatriots to raise yet again the price of grain, making the cost of simple bread so prohibitive that families starve, are led into lives of crime, and die young. Are both acts of violence?'

The High Alchemist stood looking down at Kruppe. 'In only one of those examples will you find blood on a man's hands.'

'True, deplorable as such stains are.' He poured himself some more wine.

'There are,' said Baruk, 'countless constructs whereby the wealthy man might claim innocence. Mitigating circumstances, unexpected costs of production, the law of supply and demand, and so on.'

'Indeed, a plethora of justifications, making the waters so very murky, and who then sees the blood?'

'And yet, destitution results, with all its misery, its stresses and anxieties, its foul vapours of the soul. It can be said that the wealthy grain merchant wages subtle war.'

Kruppe studied the wine through the crystal. 'And so the poor remain poor and, mayhap, even poorer. The employed but scarcely getting by cling all the harder to their jobs, even unto accepting despicable working conditions – which in turn permits the employers to fill their purses unto bulging, thus satisfying whatever hidden pathetic inadequacies they harbour. A balance can be said to exist, one never iterated, whereby the eternal war is held in check, so as to avoid anarchy. Should the grain merchant charge too high, then revolution may well explode into life.'

'Whereupon everyone loses.'

'For a time. Until the new generation of the wealthy emerge, to begin once again their predations on the poor. Balance is framed by imbalances and so it seems such things might persist for all eternity. Alas, in any long view, one sees that this is not so. The structure of society is far more fragile than most believe. To set too much faith in its resilience is to know a moment of pristine astonishment at the instant of its utter collapse – before the wolves close in.' Kruppe raised one finger.

'Yet, witness all these who would grasp hold of the crown, to make themselves the freest and the wealthiest of them all. Oh, they are most dangerous in the moment, as one might expect. Most dangerous indeed. One is encouraged to pray. Pray for dust.'

'An end to it all.'

'And a new beginning.'

'I somehow expected more from you, my friend.'

Kruppe smiled, reached down and patted the demon's pebbly head. It blinked languidly. 'Kruppe maintains a perspective as broad as his waistline, which, as you know, is unceasing. After all, where does it begin and where does it end?'

'Any other momentous news?'

'Cities live in haste. Ever headlong. Nothing changes and everything changes. A murderer stalks Gadrobi District, but Kruppe suspects you know of that. Assassins plot. You know this too, friend Baruk. Lovers tryst or

dream of said trysts. Children belabour unknown futures. People retire and others are retired, new careers abound and old nemeses lurk. Friendships unfold while others unravel. All in its time, most High Alchemist, all in its time.'

'You do not put me at ease, Kruppe.'

'Join me in a glass of this exquisite vintage!'

'There are a dozen wards sealing the cellar – twice as many as at your last visit.'

'Indeed?'

'You did not trip a single one.'

'Extraordinary!'

'Yes, it is.'

The demon belched and the heady fragrance of smoked eel wafted through the chamber. Even the demon wrinkled its nostril slits.

Kruppe produced, with a flourish, some scented candles.

An intestinal confusion of pipes, valves, copper globes, joins and vents dominated one entire end of the building's main front room. From this bizarre mechanism came rhythmic gasps (most suggestive), wheezes (inserting, as it were, a more realistic contribution) and murmurs and hissing undertones. Six nozzles jutted out, each one ready for a hose attachment or extension, but at the moment all shot out steady blue flame and this heated the crackling dry air of the chamber so that both Chaur and Barathol – working barebacked as they had been the entire day just done – were slick with sweat.

Most of the clutter in this decrepit bakery had now been removed, or, rather, transferred from inside to the narrow high-walled yard out at the back, and Chaur was on his hands and knees using wet rags to wipe dust and old flour from the well-set pavestone floor. Barathol was examining the brick bases of the three humped ovens, surprised and pleased to find, sandwiched between layers of brick, vast slabs of pumice-stone. The

interior back walls of the ovens each contained fixtures for the gas that had been used as fuel, with elongated perforated tubes projecting out beneath the racks. Could he convert these ovens to low-heat forges? Perhaps.

The old copper mixing drums remained, lining one half of the room's back wall, and would serve for quenching. He had purchased an anvil from an inbound caravan from Pale, the original buyer having, alas, died whilst the object was en route. A plains design, intended for portability – Rhivi, he had been informed – it was not quite the size he wanted or needed, but it would suffice for now. Various tongs and other tools came from the scrap markets on the west side of the city, including a very fine hammer of Aren steel (no doubt stolen from a Malazan army's weaponsmith).

On the morrow he would put in his first orders for wood, coke, coal, and raw copper, tin and iron.

It was getting late. Barathol straightened from his examination of the ovens and said to Chaur, 'Leave off now, my friend. We're grimy, true, but perhaps an outside restaurant would accommodate us, once we show our coin. I don't know about you, but some chilled beer would sit well right now.'

Looking up, Chaur's smeared and smudged face split into a wide smile.

The front door was kicked open and both turned as a half-dozen disreputable men pushed in, spreading out. Clubs and mallets in their hands, they began eyeing the equipment. A moment later and a finely dressed woman strode through the milling press, eyes settling on Barathol, upon which she smiled.

'Dear sir, you are engaged in an illegal activity—'

'Illegal? That is a reach, I'm sure. Now, before you send your thugs on a rampage of destruction, might I point out that the valves are not only open but the threads have been cut. In other words, for now, the flow of gas from the chambers beneath this structure cannot be stopped. Any sort of damage will result in, well, a ball of fire, probably of sufficient size to incinerate a sizeable area of the district.' He paused, then added, 'Such wilful destruction on your part will be viewed by most as, um, illegal. Now, you won't face

any charges since you will be dead, but the Guild that hired you will face dire retribution. The fines alone will bankrupt it.'

The woman's smile was long gone by now. 'Oh, aren't you the clever one. Since we cannot discourage you by dismantling your shop, we have no choice then but to focus our attention on yourselves.'

Barathol walked to the kneading counter and reached into a leather satchel, withdrawing a large round ball of fired clay. He faced the woman and her mob, saw a few expressions drain of blood, and was pleased. 'Yes, a Moranth grenado. Cusser, the Malazans call this one. Threaten me or my companion here, and I will be delighted to commit suicide – after all, what have we to lose that you would not happily take from us, given the chance?'

'You have lost your mind.'

'You are welcome to that opinion. Now, the question is, have you?'

She hesitated, then snarled and spun on her heel. Waving her crew to follow her, out she went.

Sighing, Barathol returned the cusser to the satchel. *'In every thirteenth crate of twelve cussers each*,' Mallet had told him, *'there is a thirteenth cusser. Empty. Why? Who knows? The Moranth are strange folk.'*

'It worked this time,' he said to Chaur, 'but I doubt it will last. So, the first order of business is to outfit you. Armour, weapons.'

Chaur stared at him as if uncomprehending.

'Remember the smell of blood, Chaur? Corpses, the dead and dismembered?'

Sudden brightening of expression, and Chaur nodded vigorously.

Sighing again, Barathol said, 'Let's climb out over the back wall and find us that beer.'

He took the satchel with him.

Elsewhere in the city, as the tenth bell of the night sounded, a fingerless man set out for a new tavern, murder on his mind. His wife went out to her

garden to kneel on stone, which she polished using oiled sand and a thick pad of leather.

A buxom, curvaceous woman – who drew admiring regard along with curdling spite depending on gender and gender preference – walked with one rounded arm hooked in the rather thinner seamed arm of a Malazan historian, who bore an expression wavering between disbelief and dismay. They strolled as lovers would, and since they were not lovers, the historian's bemusement only grew.

In the High Markets of the Estates District, south of the gallows, sauntered Lady Challice. Bored, stung with longing and possibly despoiled (in her own mind) beyond all hope of redemption, she perused the host of objects and items, none of which were truly needed, and watched as women just like her (though most were trailed by servants who carried whatever was purchased) picked through the expensive and often finely made rubbish eager as jackdaws (and as mindless? Ah, beware cruel assumptions!), and she saw herself as so very different from them. So . . . changed.

Not three hundred paces away from Lady Challice, wandering unmindful of where his steps took him, was Cutter, who had once been a thief named Crokus Younghand, who had once stolen something he shouldn't have, and, finding that he could not truly give it back, had then confused guilt and sympathy with the bliss of adoration (such errors are common), only to be released in the end by a young woman's open contempt for his heartfelt, honest admissions.

Well, times and people change, don't they just.

On a rooftop half a city away, Rallick Nom stood looking out upon the choppy sea of blue lights, at his side Krute of Talient, and they had much to discuss and this meant, given Rallick Nom's taciturnity, a long session indeed.

Krute had too much to say. Rallick weighed every morsel he fed back, not out of distrust, simply habit.

In a duelling school, long after the last of the young students had toddled out, Murillio sat under moonlight with Stonny Menackis as, weeping, she

unburdened herself to this veritable stranger – which perhaps is what made it all so easy – but Stonny had no experience with a man such as Murillio, who understood what it was to listen, to bestow rapt, thorough and most genuine attention solely upon one woman, to draw all of her essence – so pouring out – into his own being, as might a hummingbird drink nectar, or a bat a cow's ankle blood (although this analogy ill serves the tender moment).

And so between them unseen vapours waft, animal and undeniable, and so much seeps into flesh and bone and self that stunning recognition comes – when it comes – like the unlocking of a door once thought sealed for ever more.

She wept and she wept often, and each time it was somehow easier, somehow more natural, more comfortable and acceptable, no different, truly, from the soft stroke of his fingers through her short hair, the way the tips brushed her cheek to smooth away the tears – and oh, who then could be surprised by all this?

To the present, then, as the blurred moon, now risen, squints down upon three dozen figures gathering on a rooftop. Exchanging hand signals and muttering instructions and advice. Checking weapons. Three dozen, for the targets were tough, mean veterans with foreign ways. And the assault to come, well, it would be brutal, unsubtle, and, without doubt, thorough.

The usual crowd in K'rul's Bar, a dozen or so denizens choosing to be unmindful of the temple that once was – these quarried stone walls, stained with smoke and mute repositories for human voices generation upon generation, from droning chants and choral music to the howl of drunken laughter and the squeals of pinched women, these walls, then, thick and solid, ever hold to indifference in the face of drama.

Lives play out, lives parcel out portions framed by stone and wood, by tile and rafter, and all of these insensate forms have, in their time, tasted blood.

The vast, low-ceilinged main taproom with its sunken floor was once a transept or perhaps a congregation area. The narrow corridor between inset pillars along the back was once a colonnade bearing niches on which, long

ago, stood funerary urns containing the charred, ashen remains of High Priests and Priestesses. The kitchen and the three storerooms behind it had once supplied sustenance to monks and the sanctioned blade-wielders, scribes and acolytes. Now they fed patrons, staff and owners.

Up the steep, saddled, stone steps to the landing on the upper floor, from which ran passages with sharply angled ceilings, three sides of a square with the fourth interrupted by the front façade of the building. Eight cell-like rooms fed off each of these passages, those on the back side projecting inward (supported by the pillars of the main floor colonnade) while the two to either side had their rooms against the building's outer walls (thus providing windows).

The cells looking out on to the taproom had had inside walls knocked out, so that eight rooms were now three rooms, constituting the offices. The interior windows were now shuttered – no glass or skin – and Picker was in the habit of throwing them wide open when she sat at her desk, giving her a clear view of the front third of the taproom, including the entranceway.

On this night, there were few guests resident in the inn's rooms. Barathol and Chaur had not yet returned. Scillara had taken Duiker into the Daru District. The bard was on the low dais in the taproom, plunking some airy, despondent melody that few of the twenty or so patrons listened to with anything approaching attention. A stranger from Pale had taken a corner room on the northeast corner and had retired early after a meagre meal and a single pint of Gredfallan ale.

Picker could see Blend at her station beside the front door, sunk in shadows as she sat, legs outstretched, her hands cradling a mug of hot cider – bizarre tastes, that woman, since it was sultry and steamy this night. People entering rarely even noticed her, marching right past without a glance down. Blend's talent, aye, and who could say if it was natural or something else.

Antsy was yelling in the kitchen. He'd gone in there to calm down the two cooks – who despised each other – and it turned out as it usually did, with Antsy at war with everyone, including the scullions and the rats cowering

beneath the counter. In a short while utensils would start flying and Picker would have to drag herself down there.

Bluepearl was . . . somewhere. It was his habit to wander off, exploring the darker crooks and crannies of the old temple.

A night, then, no different from any other.

Bluepearl found himself in the cellar. Funny how often that happened. He had dragged out the fourth dusty cask from the crawlspace behind the wooden shelves. The first three he had sampled earlier in the week. Two had been vinegar, from which he could manage only a few swallows at a time. The other had been something thick and tarry, smelling of cedar or perhaps pine sap – in any case, he'd done little more than dip a finger in, finding the taste even fouler than the smell.

This time, however, he felt lucky. Broaching the cask, he bent close and tried a few tentative sniffs. Ale? Beer? But of course, neither lasted, did they? Yet this cask bore the sigil of the temple on the thick red wax coating the lid. He sniffed again. Definitely yeasty, but fresh, which meant . . . sorcery. He sniffed a third time.

He'd danced with all kinds of magic as a squad mage in the Bridgeburners. Aye, he had so many stories that even that sour-faced bard upstairs would gape in wonder just to hear half of them. Why, he'd ducked and rolled under the nastiest kinds, the sorceries that ripped flesh from bones, that boiled the blood, that made a man's balls swell up big as melons – oh, that time had been before he'd joined, hadn't it? Yah, the witch and the witch's daughter – never mind. What he was was an old hand.

And this stuff – Bluepearl dipped a finger in and then poked it into his mouth – oh, it was magic indeed. Something elder, hinting of blood (aye, he'd tasted the like before).

'Is that you, Brother Cuven?'

He twisted round and scowled at the ghost whose head and shoulders lifted into view through the floor. 'Do I look like Brother Cuven? You're

dead, long dead. It's all gone, you hear? So why don't you go and do the same?'

'I smelled the blade,' murmured the ghost, beginning to sink back down. 'I smelled it . . .'

No, Bluepearl decided, it probably wasn't a good thing to be drinking this stuff. Not before some kind of analysis was made. Could be Mallet might help on that. Now, had he messed it up by opening the cask? Probably it would go bad now. So, he'd better take it upstairs.

Sighing, Bluepearl replaced the wooden stopper and picked up the cask.

In the corner room on the second level, the stranger who'd booked the room for this night finished digging out the last of the bars on the window. He then doused the lantern and moved across to the hallway door, where he crouched down, listening.

From the window behind him the first of the assassins climbed in.

Blend, her eyes half closed, watched as five men came in, moving in a half-drunken clump and arguing loudly about the latest jump in the price of bread, slurred statements punctuated by shoves and buffets, and wasn't it a wonder, Blend reflected as they staggered into the taproom, how people could complain about very nearly anything as if their lives depended on it.

These ones she didn't know, meaning they'd probably spied the torchlit sign on their way back from some other place, deciding that this drunk wasn't drunk enough, and she noted that they were better dressed than most – nobles, most likely, with all the usual bluster and airs of invincibility and all that. Well, they'd be spending coin here and that was what counted.

She took another sip of cider.

*

Antsy had his shortsword out as he crept towards the back of the smallest of the three storerooms. That damned two-headed rat was back. Sure, nobody else believed him except maybe the cooks now since they'd both

seen the horrid thing, but the only way to prove it to the others was to kill the bugger and then show it to everyone.

They could then pickle it in a giant jar and make of it a curio for the bar. It would be sure to pull 'em in. Twoheaded rat caught in the kitchen of K'rul's Bar! Come see!

Oh, hold on . . . was that the best kind of advertising? He'd have to ask Picker about that.

First, of course, he needed to kill the thing.

He crept closer, eyes fixed on the dark gap behind the last crate to the left.

Kill the thing, aye. Just don't chop either head off.

Eleven figures crowded the corner room on the upper floor. Three held daggers, including the man crouched at the door. Four cradled crossbows, quarrels set. The last four – big men all – wielded swords and bucklers, and beneath their loose shirts there was fine chain.

The one at the door could now hear the argument in the taproom downstairs, accusations regarding the price of bread – a ridiculous subject, the man thought yet again, given how these ones were dressed like second and third-born nobles – but clearly no one had taken note of the peculiarity. Loud voices, especially drunk-sounding ones, had a way of filling the heads of people around them. Filling them with the wrong things.

So now everyone's attention was on the loud, obnoxious newcomers, and at least some of the targets were likely to be converging, having it in mind to maybe toss the fools out or at least ask them to tone it down and all that.

Almost time then . . .

*

Sitting on the stool on the dais, the bard let his fingers trail away from the last notes he had played, and slowly leaned back as the nobles now argued over which table to take. There were plenty to choose from so the issue was hardly worth all that energy.

He watched them for a long moment, and then set his instrument down and went over to the pitcher and tankard waiting to one side of the modest stage. He poured himself some ale, and then leaned against the wall, taking sips.

Picker rose from her chair as the door opened behind her. She turned. 'Mallet, that bunch of idiots who just came in.'

The healer nodded. 'There'll be trouble with them. Have you seen Barathol or Chaur? They were supposed to be coming back here – the Guild's probably caught wind of what he's up to by now. I'm thinking of maybe heading over, in case—'

Picker held up her hand, two quick signals that silenced Mallet. 'Listen to them,' she said, frowning. 'It's not sounding right.'

After a moment, Mallet nodded. 'We'd better head down.'

Picker turned and leaned on the sill, squinting at the shadows where sat Blend – and she saw those outstretched legs slowly draw back. 'Shit.'

It was an act. That conclusion arrived sudden and cold as a winter wind. Alarmed, Blend rose from her chair, hands slipping beneath her raincape.

As the outside door opened once more.

That damned rat had slipped beneath the door leading to the cellar – Antsy saw its slithery tail wriggle out of sight and swore under his breath. He could catch it on the stairs—

The cellar door swung open and there stood Bluepearl, carrying a dusty cask as if it was a newborn child.

'Did you see it?' Antsy demanded.

'See what?'

'The two-headed rat! It just went under the door!'

'Gods below, Antsy. Please, no more. There's no twoheaded rat. Move aside, will you? This thing's heavy.'

And he shouldered past Antsy, out into the kitchen.

Three cloaked figures stepped in from outside K'rul's Bar, crossbows at the ready. The bolts snapped out. Behind the bar, Skevos, who was handling the shift this night, was driven back as a quarrel thudded into his chest, shattering his sternum. A second quarrel shot up towards the office window where Picker was leaning out and she lunged back, either struck or dodging there was no way to tell. The third quarrel caught Hedry, a serving girl of fifteen years of age, and spun her round, her tray of mugs tumbling over.

From closer to the dais, the five drunks drew knives and swords from beneath their cloaks and fanned out, hacking at everyone within reach.

Shrieks filled the air.

Stepping out from her table, Blend slid like smoke into the midst of the three figures at the doorway. Her knives flickered, slashed, opening the throat of the man directly in front of her, severing the tendons of the nearer arm of the man to her left. Ducking beneath the first man as he toppled forward, she thrust one of her daggers into the chest of the third assassin. The point punched through chain and the blade snapped. She brought the other one forward in an upper cut, stabbing between the man's legs. As he went down, Blend tore the knife free and spun to slash at the face of the second assassin. Throwing his head back to avoid the blade drove it into a low rafter. There was a heavy crunch and the man sagged on watery knees. Blend stabbed him through an eye.

She heard a fourth crossbow release and something punched her left shoulder, flinging her round. The arm below that shoulder seemed to have vanished – she could feel nothing – and she heard the knife clunk on the floor, even as the assassin who had held back in the doorway now rushed towards her, crossbow discarded and daggers drawn.

Mallet had opened the door at the moment that Picker – leaning out of the window – gave a startled yelp. A quarrel slammed into the wall not an arm's reach from the healer's head. Ducking, he threw himself out into the corridor.

As he half straightened, he saw figures pouring from round the corner to his left. Cords thrummed. One bolt punched into his stomach. The other ripped through his throat. He fell backward in a wash of blood and pain.

Lying on his back, hearing footfalls fast approach, Mallet reached up to his neck – he couldn't breathe – blood gushed down into his lungs, hot and numbing. Frantic, he summoned High Denul—

A shadow descended over him and he looked up into a passive young face, the eyes blank as a dagger lifted into view.

*Kick open the gate, Whiskeyjack—*

Mallet watched the point flash down.

A sting in his right eye, and then darkness.

Mallet's killer straightened, withdrawing the dagger, and he wondered, briefly, at the odd smile on the dead man's face.

Emerging from the kitchen, ducking beneath the low crossbeam of the doorway leading into the taproom, Bluepearl heard crossbows loose, heard screams, and then the hiss of swords whipped free of scabbards. He looked up.

A flung dagger pinned his right hand to the cask. Shouting at the fiery agony, he staggered back as two assassins rushed towards him. One with a knife, the other with a long, thin-bladed sword.

The attacker with the knife was in the lead, his weapon raised.

Bluepearl spat at him.

That pearlescent globule transmogrified in the air, expanding into a writhing ball of serpents. A dozen fanged jaws struck the assassin in the face. He screamed in horror, slashing at his own face with his knife.

Bluepearl sought to drop the cask, only to have its weight tug his arm downward – his hand still pinned – and he shrieked at the burst of agony.

He had time to look up and see the sword as it was thrust into his face. Into the side of his nose, the point punching deeper, upward, driving into his

forebrain.

At the threshold to the cellar, Antsy heard the scrap erupt in the taproom. Whirling round, loosing twenty curses in fourteen different languages, readjusting his grip on his shortsword. Gods, it sounded like unholy slaughter out there. He needed a damned shield!

The cooks and scullions were rushing for the back door – and all at once there were screams from the alley beyond.

Antsy plunged into the storeroom on the left. To the crate at the far end, beneath the folds of burlap. He jimmied the lid open and plucked out three, four sharpers, stuffing them beneath his shirt. A fifth one for his left hand. Then he rushed back out into the kitchen.

One cook and two scullions – both girls – were running back inside, and Antsy saw cloaked forms crowding the back door. 'Down!' he screamed, throwing the sharper overhand, hard, straight past the two assassins in the doorway. The sharper struck the alley wall and exploded.

He saw red mist burst round the two visible assassins, like Hood's own haloes. They both slammed down face first. From the alley beyond, a chorus of terrible shrieks. Antsy drew out another sharper, ran to the doorway. Standing on the backs of the dead assassins, he leaned out and threw the grenado into the alley. Another snapping, fierce detonation. And there were no more cries out there.

'Chew on that, you fuckin' arseholes!'

*

Picker rolled across the floor in the wake of that first quarrel. She saw Mallet lunge into the corridor, saw the bolts take him down. Scrambling – knowing the healer was a dead man – she threw herself at the office door, slamming it shut even as footfalls rushed closer. Dropping the latch, a heartbeat before a heavy weight pounded into the solid barrier, she went to the crate at the foot of the desk.

Fumbled with the key for a moment – thundering thumps from the door behind her, mayhem in the taproom below – before working the lock free

and flinging back the lid. She drew out her heavy crossbow and a clutch of quarrels.

She heard the echo of sharpers from the kitchen and grinned, but it was a cold grin.

On her feet once more, even as wood splintered on the door, she rushed back to the window – in time to see Blend knocked back by a bolt in her shoulder, and an assassin lunging after her from the doorway.

It was a damned good shot, her quarrel striking the man in the forehead, snapping his head back in a burst of blood, skull and brains.

Whirling round, she went back to the crate, found the lone sharper she'd stashed there, then back to the window, where she leapt up on to the sill, balanced in a crouch. Directly below was a table. Two bodies bled out beside it, legs tangled in the knocked-over chairs – two innocent patrons, two regulars who never did nobody any harm, good with tips, always a smile—

The door crashed open behind her. She twisted and threw the sharper, then dropped down from the sill. The crack of the grenado in the office, a gout of flames and smoke, as Picker landed on the tabletop.

It exploded beneath her. One of her knees slammed into her chin and she felt teeth crack as she fell to one side, thumping down on one of the corpses. She managed to hold on to the crossbow, although the quarrels scattered across the floor.

Spitting blood, she sat up.

*

Blend saw her attacker flung back, saw his head cave inward above his eyes. She crouched down, reaching up for the quarrel embedded in her left shoulder. The point was jammed into the cartilage between the bone of the upper arm and the shoulder's socket. Leaving it in there was probably worse than pulling the damned thing out. Gritting her teeth, she tugged the bolt free.

That made her pass out.

After pushing the surviving crew in the kitchen back out into the alley – now crowded with a dozen torn-up corpses – Antsy crossed the room, collecting the iron lid of a large cauldron along the way. At the entrance leading to the taproom he found Bluepearl, dead as dead could be in a pool of ale, and just beyond him knelt an assassin who seemed to have taken his dagger to his own face, which was now a sliced, shredded, eyeless mess. He was crooning some wordless melody from deep in his throat.

Antsy's backslash split the bastard's skull. Tugging the sword loose, he edged forward.

There'd been another sharper, from upstairs, and the crashing of furniture, but little else now. Moving in a crouch, sword ready, lid held like a shield, he worked his way round the near end of the bar.

There was Picker, on her knees directly ahead, reaching out for a quarrel on the floor and quickly loading her marine-issue weapon. Blend was lying motionless near the bar entrance.

Antsy hissed.

Picker looked up, met his eyes. She signalled with one hand, six gestures, and he nodded, answering with two.

Dripping ale and blood, a few soft groans here and there.

Soft footfalls on the landing at the top of the stairs.

Antsy set down his sword, drew out a sharper and showed it to Picker, who nodded and then quietly moved round, using the wreckage of the table for cover, and trained her crossbow on the stairs.

When he saw she was ready, Antsy lifted his makeshift shield to cover shoulder and head, then quickly stepped round to the foot of the stairs. And threw the grenado upward.

Two quarrels clanged off the cauldron lid, with enough force to knock it from his hand. At the same moment an assassin, having launched herself from halfway down the stairs, sailed down towards him.

Picker's quarrel caught the attacker somewhere in the midsection, convulsing her in mid-flight. She crashed down just as the sharper detonated near the landing.

And then Antsy, sword in hand once more, was rushing up those steps. Picker raced into his wake, drawing out her own sword. 'Get outa the way with that pigsticker!' she snarled. 'Cover me in close!' She pulled him back and round by one shoulder and pushed past.

Limbs twitching from a heap of bodies on the landing, and splashed blood on the walls – and movement beyond, somewhere in the corridor.

She scrambled over the dead and dying on the landing, pitched into the corridor and, seeing three assassins slowly picking themselves up from the floor, charged forward.

Short work cutting down the stunned attackers, with Antsy guarding her back.

Blend opened her eyes and wondered why she was lying on the floor. She attempted to lift her left arm and gasped as pain blossomed red and hot, leaving her half blind in its aftermath. Oh, now she remembered. With a low moan, she rolled on to her good side and worked herself into a sitting position, blinking sweat and worse from her eyes.

The bar door was open, one of the hinges broken.

In the street beyond, she saw at least a half-dozen cloaked figures, gathered and creeping closer.

*Shit.*

Desperate, she looked round for the nearest discarded weapon. Knowing she wouldn't have time, knowing they were going to cut her down once and for all. Still – she saw a knife and reached out for it.

The six assassins came at a sprint.

Someone slammed into them from one side, loosing a bellowing bawl like a wounded bull, and Blend stared as the huge man – *Chaur* – swung his

enormous fists. Heads snapped back on broken necks, faces crumpled in sprays of blood—

And then Barathol was there, with nothing more than a knife, slashing into the reeling assassins, and Blend could see the fear in the blacksmith's eyes – fear for Chaur, dread for what might happen if the assassins recovered—

As they were now doing.

Blend pushed herself to her feet, collecting the dagger from the floor as she staggered forward—

And was shoved aside by Antsy. Hacking at the nearest assassin with his shortsword, a dented cauldron lid shielding his left side.

Chaur, his forearms slashed by desperate daggers, picked up an assassin and threw him down on to the cobbles. Bones snapped. Still bawling, he picked the broken form up by an ankle and swung him into the air, round, then loose – to collide with another assassin, and both went down. Barathol was suddenly above the first man, driving his boot heel down on his temple. Limbs spasmed.

Antsy pulled his sword from an assassin's chest and readied himself for his next target, then slowly straightened.

Leaning against the doorframe, Blend spat and said, 'All down, Sergeant.'

Barathol wrapped Chaur in a hug to calm the man down. Tears streaked Chaur's broad cheeks, and his fists were still closed, like massive bloody mauls at the ends of his arms. He had wet himself.

Blend and Antsy watched as the blacksmith hugged his friend tightly, with need and with raw relief, so exposed that both Malazans had to look away.

Picker came up behind Blend. 'You gonna live?' she asked.

'Good as new, as soon as Mallet—' 'No. Not Mallet, love.'

Blend squeezed shut her eyes. 'They caught us, Pick,' she said. 'They caught us good.'

'Aye.'

She glanced over. 'You got 'em all in the taproom? Damned impressive—'

'No, I didn't, but they're all down. Four of 'em, right at the foot of the stage. Looked like they rushed it.'

*Rushed it? But who was up there . . .* 'We lose our bard, then?'

'Don't know,' Picker said. 'Didn't see him.'

*Rushed the stage . . .*

'We lost Bluepearl, too.'

Blend slowly closed her eyes a second time. Oh, she was hurting, and a lot of that hurt couldn't get sewn up. *They caught us.* 'Picker.'

'They slaughtered everyone, Blend. People with nothing but bad luck being here tonight. Skevos. Hedry, Larmas, little Boothal. All to take us down.'

From up the street came a squad of City Guard, lanterns swinging.

For a scene such as Blend was looking out on right now, there should be a crowd of onlookers, the ones hungry to see injured, dying people, the ones who fed on such things. But there was no one.

Because this was Guild work.

'Some of us are still breathing,' Blend said. 'It's not good to do that. Leave some marines still breathing.'

'No, it's not good at all.'

Blend knew that tone. Still, she wondered. *Are we enough? Is there enough in us to do this? Do we still have what's needed?* They'd lost a healer and a mage this night.

They'd lost the best of them. *Because we were careless.*

Antsy joined them as the guards closed in round Barathol and Chaur. 'Pick, Blend,' he said, 'I don't know about you two, but right now, gods below, I'm feeling old.'

A sergeant of the guard approached. 'How bad is it inside?'

No one seemed eager to reply.

Six streets away, a world away, Cutter stood in the front yard of a store selling headstones and crypt façades. An array of stylized deities, none of them temple-sanctioned as yet, beseeching blessings upon the future dead. Beru and Burn, Soliel and Nerruse, Treach and the Fallen One, Hood and Fanderay, Hound and tiger, boar and worm. The shop was closed and he looked upon stones still uncarved, awaiting names of loved ones. Against one of the low yard walls stood a row of marble sarcophagi, and against the wall opposite there were tall urns with their flared mouths, narrow necks and swollen bellies, reminding him of pregnant women . . . birth into death, wombs to hold all that remained of mortal flesh, homes to those who would answer the final question, the last question: *what lies beyond? What awaits us all? What shape the gate before me?* There were plenty of ways of asking it, but they all meant the same thing, and all sought the one answer.

One spoke of death often. The death of a friendship. The death of love. Each echoed with the finality that waited at the very end, but they were faint echoes, ghostly, acting out scenes in puppet shows swallowed in flickering shadows. *Kill a love. What lies beyond? Emptiness, cold, drifting ashes, yet does it not prove fertile? A place where a new seed is planted, finding life, growing into itself? Is this how true death is, as well?*

*From the dust, a new seed . . .*

A pleasing thought. A comforting thought.

The street behind him was modestly crowded, the last of the late night shoppers reluctant to close out this day. Maybe they had nothing to go home to. Maybe they hungered for one more purchase, in the forlorn hope that it would fill whatever emptiness gnawed deep inside.

None wandered into this yard, none wanted the reminder of what waited for them all. Why, then, had he found himself here? Was he seeking some kind of comfort, some reminder that for each and every person, no matter where, the same conclusion was on its way? One could walk, one could crawl, one could run headlong, but one could never turn round and head the other way, could never escape. Even with the truism that all grief belonged to the living, the ones left behind – facing empty spaces where someone once stood – there could be found a kind of calm repose. *We walk the same path, some farther along, some farther back, but still and for ever more the same path.*

There was, then, the death of love.

And there was, alas, its murder.

'Crokus Younghand.'

He slowly turned round. A woman stood before him, exquisitely dressed, a cloak of ermine about her shoulders. A heart-shaped face, languid eyes, painted lips, and yes, he knew this face. Had known it, a younger version, a child's version, perhaps, but now there was nothing of that child – not in the eyes, not even in the sad smile on those full lips. 'Challice D'Arle.'

Later, he would look back on this moment, on the dark warning contained in the fact that, when he spoke her name of old, she did not correct him.

Would such percipience have changed things? All that was to come?

Death and murder, seeds in the ashes, one does as one does. Sarcophagi gaped. Urns echoed hollow and dark. Stone faces awaited names, grief crouching at the gate.

Such was this night in the city of Darujhistan.

Such is this night, *everywhere*.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Where will I stand
When the walls come down
East to the sun's rise
North to winter's face
South to where stars are born
West to the road of death

Where will I stand
When the winds wage war
Fleeing the dawn
Howling the breath of ice
Blistered with desert's smile
Dusty from crypts

Where will I stand
When the world crashes down
And on all sides
I am left exposed
To weapons illimitable
From the vented host

Will I stand at all
Against such forces unbarred
Reeling to every blow
Blinded by storms of pain
As all is taken from me
So cruelly taken away

Let us not talk of courage
Nor steel fortitude
The gifts of wisdom
Burn too hot to touch

The hunger for peace
Breaks the heart

Where will I stand
In the dust of a done life
Face bared to regrets
That flail the known visage
Until none but strangers
Watch my fall

*None but Strangers*
Fisher kel Tath

The stately trees with their black trunks and midnight leaves formed a rough ring encircling Suruth Common. From the centre of the vast clearing, one could, upon facing north, see the towers of the Citadel, their slim lines echoing these sacred trees. Autumn had arrived, and the air was filled with the drifting filaments from the blackwood.

The great forges to the west lit crimson the foul clouds hanging over them, so that it seemed that one side of Kharkanas was ablaze. An eternal rain of ash plagued the massive, sprawling factories, nothing as sweet as the curled filaments to mark the coming of the cold season.

Within the refuge of Suruth Common, the blasted realm of the factories seemed worlds away. Thick beds of moss cloaked the pavestones of the clearing, muting Endest Silann's boots as he walked to the concave altar stone at the very heart. He could see no one else about – this was not the season for festivity. This was not a time for celebration of any sort. He wondered if the trees sensed him, if they were capable of focusing some kind of attention upon him, made aware by the eddies of air, the exudation of heat and breath.

He had read once a scholar's treatise describing the chemical relationship between plants and animals. The language had been clinical in the fashion of such academic efforts, and yet Endest recalled closing the book and sitting back in his chair. The notion that he could walk up to a plant, a tree, even a blackwood, and bless it with his own breath – a gift of lung-soured air that could enliven that tree, that could in truth deliver health and vigour, deliver life itself . . . ah, but that was a wonder indeed, one that, for a time, calmed the churning maelstrom that was a young man's soul.

So long ago, now, and he felt, at times, that he was done with giving gifts.

He stood alone in front of the ancient altar. The past night's modest rain had formed a shallow pool in the cup of the basalt. It was said the Andii came from the forests and their natural clearings, born to give breath to the sacred wood, and that the first fall of his people occurred the moment they walked out, to set down the first shaped stone of this city.

How many failings had there been since? Suruth Common was the last fragment of the old forest left in all Kharkanas. Blackwood itself had fed the great forges.

He had no desire to look westward. More than the fiery glow disturbed him. The frenzy in those factories – they were making weapons. Armour. They were readying for war.

He had been sent here by the High Priestess. *'Witness*,' she had said. And so he would. The eyes of the Temple, the priesthood, must remain open, aware, missing nothing in these fraught times. That she had chosen him over others – or even herself – was not a measure of respect. His presence was political, his modest rank a deliberate expression of the Temple's contempt.

*'Witness, Endest Silann. But remain silent. You are a* presence*, do you understand?'*

He did.

They appeared almost simultaneously, one from the north, one from the east and one from the south. Three brothers. Three sons. This was to be a meeting of blood and yes, they would resent him, for he did not belong. Indeed, the Temple did not belong. Would they send him away?

The trees wept their promise of a new season of life – a season that would never come, for there was nowhere left for the filaments to take root – not for scores of leagues in any direction. The river would take millions, but even those fine black threads could not float on its waters, and so what the river took the river kept, buried in the dead silts of Dorssan Ryl. *Our breath was meant to give life, not take it away. Our breath was a gift, and in that gift the blackwood found betrayal.*

*This was and is our crime, and it was and remains unforgivable.*

'Good evening, priest,' said Andarist, who then added, 'Anomander, it seems you were right.'

'An easy prediction,' Anomander replied. 'The Temple watches me the way a rove of rhotes watch a dying ginaf.'

Endest blinked. The last wild ginaf had vanished a century past and no longer did the silver-backed herds thunder across the south plains; and these days roves of rhotes winged above battlefields and nowhere else – and no, they did not starve. *Are you the last, Lord? Is this what you are saying? Mother bless me, I never know what you are saying. No one does. We share language but not meaning.*

The third brother was silent, his red eyes fixed upon the forges beneath the western sky.

'The clash between Drethdenan and Vanut Degalla draws to an end,' said Andarist. 'It may be time—'

'Should we be speaking of this?' Silchas Ruin cut in, finally turning to face Endest Silann. 'None of this is for the Temple. Especially not some pathetic third level acolyte.'

Anomander seemed uninterested in settling his attention upon Endest Silann. In the face of his brother's belligerence, he shrugged. 'This way, Silchas, perhaps we can ensure the Temple remains . . . neutral.'

'By unveiling to it all that we intend? Why should the Temple hold to any particular faith in us? What makes the three of us more worthy of trust than, say, Manalle, or Hish Tulla?'

'There is an obvious answer to that,' said Andarist. 'Priest?'

He could refuse a reply. He could feign ignorance. He was naught but a third level acolyte, after all. Instead, he said, 'You three are not standing here trying to kill each other.'

Andarist smiled at Silchas Ruin.

Who scowled and looked away once again.

'We have things to discuss,' said Anomander. 'Andarist?'

'I have already sent representatives to both camps. An offer to mediate. Veiled hints of potential alliances against the rest of you. The key will be in getting Drethdenan and Vanut into the same room, weapons sheathed.'

'Silchas?'

'Both Hish and Manalle have agreed to our pact. Manalle still worries me, brothers. She is no fool—'

'And Hish is?' laughed Andarist – a maddeningly easy laugh, given the treachery they were discussing.

'Hish Tulla is not subtle. Her desires are plain. It is as they all say: she does not lie. No, Manalle is suspicious. After all, I am speaking of the greatest crime of all, the spilling of kin's blood.' He paused, then faced Anomander, and suddenly his expression was transformed. Unease, something bewildered and lit with horror. 'Anomander,' he whispered, 'what are we doing?'

Anomander's features hardened. 'We are strong enough to survive this. You will see.' Then he looked at Andarist. 'The one who will break our hearts stands before us. Andarist, who chooses to turn away.'

'A choice, was it?' At the heavy silence that followed, he laughed again. 'Yes, it was. One of us . . . it must be, at least one of us, and I have no desire to walk your path. I have not the courage for such a thing. The courage, and the . . . cruel madness. No, brothers, mine is the easiest task – I am to do *nothing.'*

'Until I betray you,' said Silchas, and Endest was shocked to see the white-skinned Lord's wet eyes.

'There is no other way through,' said Andarist.

Centuries into millennia, Endest Silann would wonder – and never truly know – if all that followed was as these three had planned. Courage, Andarist had called it. And . . . cruel madness – by the Mother, yes – such destruction, the sheer audacity of the treachery – could they have *meant* all of that?

The next time Anomander had met Endest Silann had been on the bridge at the foot of the Citadel, and in his words he made it clear that he had not recognized him as the same man as the one sent to witness his meeting with

his brothers. A strange carelessness for one such as Anomander. Although, unquestionably, the Lord had other things on his mind at that moment.

Endest Silann had delivered to the High Priestess his account of that fell meeting. And in relating the details of the betrayal, such as could be culled from what he had heard – all the implications – he had expected to see outrage in her face. Instead – and, he would think later, with prescient symbolism – she had but turned away.

There had been no storms in the sky then. Nothing to hint of what would come. The blackwood trees of Suruth Common had lived for two millennia, maybe longer, and each season they shed their elongated seeds to the wind. Yet, when next he looked upon those stately trees, they would be on fire.

'You have grown far too quiet, old friend.'

Endest Silann looked up from the dying flames. Dawn was fast approaching. 'I was reminded . . . the way that wood crumbles into dissolution.'

'The release of energy. Perhaps a better way of seeing it.'

'Such release is ever fatal.'

'Among plants, yes,' said Caladan Brood.

*Among plants* . . . 'I think of the breath we give them – our gift.'

'And the breath they give back,' said the warlord, 'that burns if touched. I am fortunate, I think,' he continued, 'that I have no appreciation of irony.'

'It is a false gift, for with it we claim ownership. Like crooked merchants, every one of us. We give so that we can then justify taking it back. I have come to believe that this exchange is the central tenet of our relationship . . . with everything in the world. Any world. Human, Andii, Edur, Liosan. Imass, Barghast, Jaghut—'

'Not Jaghut,' cut in Caladan Brood.

'Ah,' said Endest Silann. 'I know little of them, in truth. What then was their bargain?'

'Between them and the world? I don't even know if an explanation is possible, or at least within the limits of my sorry wit. Until the forging of the ice – defending against the Imass – the Jaghut gave far more than they took. Excepting the Tyrants, of course, which is what made such tyranny all the more reprehensible in the eyes of other Jaghut.'

'So, they were stewards.'

'No. The notion of stewardship implies superiority. A certain arrogance.'

'An earned one, surely, since the power to destroy exists.'

'Well, the illusion of power, I would say, Endest. After all, if you destroy the things around you, eventually you destroy yourself. It is arrogance that asserts a kind of separation, and from that the notion that we can shape and reshape the world to suit our purposes, and that we can *use* it, as if it was no more than a living tool composed of a million parts.' He paused and shook his head. 'See? Already my skull aches.'

'Only with the truth, I think,' said Endest Silann. 'So, the Jaghut did not think of themselves as stewards. Nor as parasites. They were without arrogance? I find that an extraordinary thing, Warlord. Beyond comprehension, in fact.'

'They shared this world with the Forkrul Assail, who were their opposites. They were witnesses to the purest manifestation of arrogance and separation.'

'Was there war?'

Caladan Brood was silent for so long that Endest began to believe that no answer was forthcoming, and then he glanced up with his bestial eyes glittering in the ebbing flames of the hearth. '"Was"?'

Endest Silann stared across at his old friend, and the breath slowly hissed from him. 'Gods below, Caladan. No war can last that long.'

'It can, when the face of the army is without relevance.'

The revelation was . . . monstrous. Insane. 'Where?'

The warlord's smile was without humour. 'Far away from here, friend, which is well. Imagine what your Lord might elect to do, if it was otherwise.'

*He would intervene. He would not be able to stop himself.*

Caladan Brood rose then. 'We have company.'

A moment later the heavy thud of wings sounded in the fading darkness above them, and Endest Silann looked up to see Crone, wings crooked now, riding shifting currents of air as she descended, landing with a scatter of stones just beyond the edge of firelight.

'I smell fish!'

'Wasn't aware your kind could smell at all,' Caladan Brood said.

'Funny oaf, although it must be acknowledged that our eyes are the true gift of perfection – among many, of course. Why, Great Ravens are plagued with excellence – and do I see picked bones? I do, with despondent certainty – you rude creatures have left me nothing!'

She hopped closer, regarding the two men with first one eye and then the other. 'Grim conversation? Glad I interrupted. Endest Silann, your Lord summons you. Caladan Brood, not you. There, messages delivered! Now I want food!'

Harak fled through Night. Old tumbled streets, the wreckage of the siege picked clean save for shattered blocks of quarried stone; into narrow, tortured alleys where the garbage was heaped knee-high; across collapsed buildings, scrambling like a spider. He knew Thove was dead. He knew Bucch was dead, and a half-dozen other conspirators. All dead. Killers had pounced. Tiste Andii, he suspected, some kind of secret police, penetrating the cells and now slaughtering every liberator they could hunt down.

He'd always known that the unhuman demon-spawn were far from the innocent, benign occupiers they played at being, oh, yes, they were rife with deadly secrets. Plans of slavery and oppression, of tyranny, not just over Black Coral, but beyond, out to the nearby cities – wherever humans could be found, the Tiste Andii cast covetous eyes. And now he had proof.

Someone was after him, tracking with all the deliberate malice of a hunting cat – he'd yet to spy that murderer, but in a world such as Night that was not surprising. The Tiste Andii were skilled in their realm of Darkness, deadly as serpents.

He needed to reach the barrow. He needed to get to Gradithan. Once there, Harak knew he would be safe. They had to be warned, and new plans would have to be made. Harak knew that he might well be the last one left in Black Coral.

He stayed in the most ruined areas of the city, seeking to circle round or, failing that, get out through the inland gate that led into the forested hills – where the cursed Bridgeburners had made a stand, killing thousands with foul sorcery and Moranth munitions – why, the entire slope was still nothing more than shattered, charred trees, fragments of mangled armour, the occasional leather boot and, here and there in the dead soil, jutting bones. Could he reach that, he could find a path leading into Daylight and then, finally, he would be safe.

This latter option became ever more inviting – he was not too far from the gate, and these infernal shadows and the endless gloom here were of no help to him – the Tiste Andii could see in this darkness, after all, whilst he stumbled about half blind.

He heard a rock shift in the rubble behind him, not thirty paces away. Heart pounding, Harak set his eyes upon the gate. Smashed down in the siege, but a path of sorts had been cleared through it, leading out to the raised road that encircled the inland side of the city. Squinting, he could make out no figures lingering near that gate.

Twenty paces away now. He picked up his pace and, once on to the cleared avenue, sprinted for the opening in the wall.

Were those footfalls behind him? He dared not turn.

*Run! Damn my legs – run!*

On to the path, threading between heaps of broken masonry, and outside the city!

Onward, up the slope to the raised road, a quick, frantic scamper across it, and down into the tumbled rocks at the base of the ruined slope. Battered earth, makeshift gravemounds, tangled roots and dead branches. Whimpering, he clambered on, torn and scratched, coughing in the dust of dead pine bark.

And there, near the summit, was that sunlight? Yes. It was near dawn, after all. Sun – blessed light!

A quick glance back revealed nothing – he couldn't make out what might be whispering through the wreckage below.

He was going to make it.

Harak scrambled the last few strides, plunged into cool morning air, shafts of golden rays – and a figure rose into his path. A tulwar lashed out. Harak's face bore an expression of astonishment, frozen there as his head rolled from his shoulders, bounced and pitched back down the slope, where it lodged near a heap of bleached, fractured bones. The body sank down on to its knees, at the very edge of the old trench excavated by the Bridgeburners, and there it stayed.

Seerdomin wiped clean his blade and sheathed the weapon. Was this the last of them? He believed that it was. The city . . . cleansed. Leaving only those out at the barrow. Those ones would persist for a time, in ignorance that everything in Black Coral had changed.

He was weary – the hunt had taken longer than he had expected. Yes, he would rest now. Seerdomin looked about, studied the rumpled trenchwork the sappers had managed with little more than folding shovels. And he was impressed. A different kind of soldier, these Malazans.

But even this the forest was slowly reclaiming.

He sat down a few paces from the kneeling corpse and settled his head into his gloved hands. He could smell leather, and sweat, and old blood. The smells of his past, and now they had returned. In his mind he could hear echoes, the rustle of armour and scabbards brushing thighs. Urdomen marching in ranks, the visors on their great helms dropped down to hide

their fevered eyes. Squares of Betaklites forming up outside the city, preparing to strike northward. Scalandi skirmishers and Tenescowri – the starving multitudes, desperate as bared teeth. He recalled their mass, shifting in vast heaves, ripples and rushes on the plain, the way each wave left bodies behind – the weakest ones, the dying ones – and how eddies would form round them, as those closest swung back to then descend on their hapless comrades.

When there was no one else, the army ate itself. And he had simply looked on, expressionless, wrapped in his armour, smelling iron, leather, sweat and blood.

Soldiers who had fought in a just war – a war they could see as just, anyway – could hold on to a sense of pride, every sacrifice a worthy one. And so fortified, they could leave it behind, finding a new life, a different life. And no matter how grotesque the injustices of the world around them, the world of the present, that veteran could hold on to the sanctity of what he or she had lived through.

But fighting an unjust war . . . that was different. If one had any conscience at all, there was no escaping the crimes committed, the blood on the hands, the sheer insanity of that time – when honour was a lie, duty a weapon that silenced, and courage itself was stained and foul. Suddenly, then, there was no defence against injustice, no sanctuary to be found in memories of a righteous time. And so anger seethed upward, filling every crack, building into rage. There was no way to give it a voice, no means of releasing it, and so the pressure built. When it finally overwhelmed, then suicide seemed the easiest option, the only true escape.

Seerdomin could see the logic of that, but logic was not enough. Anyone could reason themselves into a corner, and so justify surrender. It was even easier when courage itself was vulnerable to abuse and sordid mockery. Because, after all, to persist, to live on, demanded courage, and that was only possible when the virtue remained worthy of respect.

Seerdomin lifted his head and glared over at the decapitated corpse. 'Can you understand any of that, Harak? Can you grasp, now, finally, how the very existence of people like you gives me reason to stay alive? Because

you give my rage a face, and my sword, well, it's hungry for faces.' It was either that, or the fury within him would devour his own soul. No, better to keep the face he slashed open someone else's, rather than his own. Keep finding them, one after another. Justice was so weak. The corrupt won, the pure of heart failed and fell to the wayside. Graft and greed crowed triumphant over responsibility and compassion. He could fight that, and that fight need not even be in his own name. He could fight for Black Coral, for the Tiste Andii, for humanity itself.

Even for the Redeemer – *no, that cannot be. What I do here can never be healed – there can be no redemption for me. Ever. You must see that. All of you must see that.*

He realized he was pleading – but to whom? He did not know. *We were put in an impossible situation, and, at least for us, the tyrant responsible is dead – has been punished. It could have been worse – he could have escaped retribution, escaped justice.*

There was trauma in war. Some people survived it; others were for ever trapped in it. For many of those, this circumstance was not a failing on their part. Not some form of sickness, or insanity. It was, in truth, the consequence of a profoundly moral person's inability to reconcile the conflicts in his or her soul. No healer could heal that, because there was nothing to heal. No elixir swept the malady away. No salve erased the scars. The only reconciliation possible was to make those responsible accountable, to see them face justice. And more often than not, history showed that such an accounting rarely ever took place. And so the veteran's wounds never mend, the scars never fade, the rage never subsides.

So Seerdomin had come to believe, and he well knew that what he was doing here, with weapon in hand, solved nothing of the conflict within him. For he was as flawed as anyone, and no matter how incandescent his rage, his righteous fury, he could not deliver pure, unsullied justice – for such a thing was collective, integral to a people's identity. Such a thing must be an act of society, of civilization. *Not Tiste Andii society – they clearly will not accept that burden, will not accede to meting out justice on behalf of us*

*humans, nor should they be expected to. And so . . . here I am, and I hear the Redeemer weep.*

*One cannot murder in the name of justice.*

Irreconcilable. What he had been, what he was now.

The things he did then, and all he was doing here, at this moment.

The would-be usurper knelt beside him, headless in sour symbolism. But it was a complicated, messy symbol. And he could find for himself but one truth in all of this.

*Heads roll downhill.*

*It may be that in the belief of the possibility of redemption, people willingly do wrong. Redemption waits, like a side door, there in whatever court of judgement we eventually find ourselves. Not even the payment of a fine is demanded, simply the empty negotiation that absolves responsibility. A shaking of hands and off one goes, through that side door, with the judge benignly watching on. Culpability and consequences neatly evaded.*

Oh, Salind was in a crisis indeed. Arguments reduced until the very notion of redemption was open to challenge. The Redeemer embraced, taking all within himself. Unquestioning, delivering absolution as if it was without value, worthless, whilst the reward to those embraced was a gift greater than a tyrant's hoard.

Where was justice in all of this? Where was the punishment for crimes committed, retribution for wrongs enacted? *There is, in this, no moral compass. No need for one, for every path leads to the same place, where blessing is passed out, no questions asked.*

*The cult of the Redeemer . . . it is an abomination.*

She had begun to understand how priesthoods were born, the necessity of sanctioned forms, rules and prohibitions, the moral filter defined by accepted notions of justice. And yet, she could also see how profoundly dangerous such an institution could become, as arbiters of morality, as dispensers of that justice. Faces like hooded vultures, guarding the door to

the court, choosing who gets inside and who doesn't. How soon before the first bag of silver changes hands? How soon before the first reprehensible criminal buys passage into the arms of the blind, unquestioning Redeemer?

She could fashion such a church, could formalize the cult into a religion, and she could impose a harsh, unwavering sense of justice. But what of the next generation of priests and priestesses? And the one after that, and the next one? How long before the hard rules make that church a self-righteous, power-mongering tyranny? How long before corruption arrives, when the hidden heart of the religion is the simple fact that the Redeemer embraces *everyone who comes before him*? A fact virtually guaranteed to breed cynicism in the priesthood, and from such cynicism secular acquisitiveness would be inevitable.

This loss was not just a loss of faith in the Redeemer. It was a loss of faith in religion itself.

Her prayers touched a presence, were warmed by the nearby breath of an immortal. And she pleaded with that force. She railed. Made demands. Insisted on explanations, answers.

And he took all her anger into his embrace, as he did everything else. And that was *wrong*.

There were two meanings to the word 'benighted'. The first was pejorative, a form of dour ignorance. The second was an honour conferred in service to a king or queen. It was this latter meaning that had been applied to Seerdomin, a title of respect.

There was a third definition, one specific to Black Coral and to Seerdomin himself. He dwelt in Night, after all, where Darkness was not ignorance, but profound wisdom, ancient knowledge, symbolic of the very beginning of existence, the first womb from which all else was born. He dwelt in Night, then, and for a time had made daily pilgrimages out to the barrow with its forbidden riches, a one-man procession of rebirth that Salind only now comprehended.

Seerdomin was, in truth, the least ignorant of them all. Had he known Itkovian in his life? She thought not. Indeed, it would have been impossible.

And so whatever had drawn Seerdomin to the cult arrived later, after Itkovian's death, after his ascension. Thus, a personal crisis, a need that he sought to appease with daily prayers.

But . . . why bother? The Redeemer turned no one away. Blessing and forgiveness was a certainty. The bargaining was a sham. Seerdomin need only have made that procession once, and been done with it.

Had no one confronted him, he would still be making his daily pilgrimage, like an animal pounding its head against the bars of a cage – and, disregarded to one side, the door hanging wide open.

Was that significant? Seerdomin did not want the Redeemer's embrace. No, the redemption he sought was of a different nature.

Need drove her from the bed in the temple, out into Night. She felt weak, light-headed, and every step seemed to drain appalling amounts of energy into the hard cobbles underfoot. Wrapped in a blanket, unmindful of those she passed, she walked through the city.

There was meaning in the barrow itself, in the treasure that none could touch. There was meaning in Seerdomin's refusal of the easy path. In his prayers that asked either something the Redeemer could not grant, or nothing at all. There was, perhaps, a secret in the Redeemer's very embrace, something hidden, possibly even deceitful. He took in crimes and flaws and held it all in abeyance . . . until when? The redeemed's death? What then? Did some hidden accounting await each soul?

How much desperation hid within each and every prayer uttered? The hope for blessing, for peace, for the sense that something greater than oneself might acknowledge that hapless self, and might indeed alter all of reality to suit the self's desires. Were prayers nothing more than attempted bargains? A pathetic assertion of some kind of reciprocity?

Well, she would not bargain. No, she had questions, and she wanted answers. She *demanded* answers. If the faith that was given to a god came from nothing more than selfish desires, then it was no less sordid than base greed. If to hand over one's soul to a god was in fact a surrendering of will,

then that soul was worthless, a willing slave for whom freedom – and all the responsibility that entailed – was anathema.

She found herself reeling through the gate, on to the road that Seerdomin once walked day after day. It had begun raining, the drops light, cool on her fevered forehead, sweet as tears in her eyes. Not much grew to either side of the road, not even the strange Andiian plants that could be found in the walled and rooftop gardens. The dying moon had showered this place in salt water, a downpour the remnants of which remained as white crust like a cracked skin on the barren earth.

She could smell the sea rising around her as she staggered on.

And then, suddenly, she stumbled into daylight, the sun's shafts slanting in from the east whilst a single grey cloud hung directly overhead, the rain a glittering tracery of angled streaks.

Bare feet slipping on the road's cobbles, Salind continued on. She could see the barrow ahead, glistening and freshly washed, with the mud thick and churned up round its base. There were no pilgrims to be seen – perhaps it was too early. *Perhaps they have all left.* But no, she could see smoke rising from cookfires in the encampment. *Have they lost their way, then? Is that surprising? Have I not suffered my own crisis of faith?*

She drew closer, gaze fixed now on the barrow.

*Redeemer! You will hear me. You must hear me!*

She fell on to her knees in the mud and its chill rippled up through her. The rain was past and steam now rose on all sides. Water ran in trickles everywhere on the barrow, a hundred thousand tears threading through all the offerings.

*Redeemer—*

A fist closed in the short hair at the back of her neck. She was savagely pulled upright, head yanked round. She stared up into Gradithan's grinning face.

'You should never have come back,' the man said. His breath stank of kelyk, and she saw the brown stains on his lips and mouth. His eyes looked strangely slick, like stones washed by waves. 'I am tempted, Priestess, to give you to my Urdomen – not that they'd have you.'

*Urdomen. He was an Urdo, a commander of the fanatic élites. Now I begin to underst—*

'But Monkrat might.'

She frowned. What had he been saying? 'Leave me,' she said, and was shocked at how thin and weak her voice sounded. 'I want to pray.'

He twisted his grip, forcing her round to face him, close enough to be lovers. 'Monkrat!' Someone came up beside them.

'Get some saemankelyk. I'd like to see how well she dances.'

She could feel his hard knuckles pressing the back of her neck, twisting and ripping hair from its roots, pushing into the bruises he'd already made.

'I can give you nothing,' she said.

'Oh, but you will,' he replied. 'You'll give us a path,' and he turned her back to face the barrow, 'straight to him.'

She did not understand, and yet fear gripped her, and as she heard someone hurrying up, bottle swishing, her fear burgeoned into terror.

Gradithan tugged her head further back. 'You are going to drink, woman. Waste a drop and you'll pay.'

Monkrat came close, lifting the bottle with its stained mouth to her lips.

She sought to twist her face away but the Urdo's grip denied that. He reached up with his other hand and closed her nostrils.

'Drink, and then you can breathe again.'

Salind drank.

Finding her gone from her room, Spinnock Durav stood for a long moment, staring down at the rumpled mattress of the cot, noting the missing blanket,

seeing that she'd left most of her clothes behind, including her moccasins. He told himself he should not be surprised. She had not much welcomed his attentions.

Still, he felt as if some cold, grinning bastard had carved a gaping hole in his chest. It was absurd, that he should have been careless enough, complacent enough, to find himself this vulnerable. A human woman of so few years – he was worse than some old man sitting on the temple steps and drooling at every young thing sauntering past. Love could be such a squalid emotion: burning bright in the midst of pathos, the subject of pity and contempt, it blazed with brilliant stupidity all the same.

Furious with himself, he wheeled about and strode from the room.

In a city of unending Night, no bell was too early for a drink. He left the temple and the keep, made his way down ghostly streets to the Scour.

Inside, Resto was behind the bar, red-eyed and scratching at his beard and saying nothing as Spinnock walked to the table at the back. Tavern-keepers knew well the myriad faces of misery, and unbidden he drew a tall tankard of ale, bringing it over with gaze averted.

Glaring at the other tables – all empty; he was the only customer – Spinnock collected the tankard and swallowed down half its foamy contents.

Moments after Resto delivered the third such tankard the door opened and in walked Seerdomin.

Spinnock felt a sudden apprehension. Even from there the man smelled of blood, and his face was a ravaged thing, aged and pallid, the eyes so haunted that the Tiste Andii had to look away.

As if unaware of his reaction, Seerdomin came to Spinnock's table and sat down opposite him. Resto arrived with a jug and a second tankard.

'She doesn't want my help,' Spinnock said.

Seerdomin said nothing as he poured ale into his tankard, setting the jug back down with a thump. 'What are you talking about?'

Spinnock looked away. 'I couldn't find you. I searched everywhere.'

'That desperate for a game?'

*A game? Oh. Kef Tanar.* 'You are looking at a pathetic old man, Seerdomin. I feel I must sacrifice the last of my dignity, here and now, and tell you everything.'

'I don't know if I'm ready for that,' the man replied. 'Your dignity is important to me.'

Spinnock flinched, and still would not meet Seerdomin's eyes. 'I have surrendered my heart.'

'Well. You can't marry her, though, can you?'

'Who?'

'The High Priestess – although it's about time you realized that she loves you in return, probably always has. You damned Andii – you live so long it's as if you're incapable of grasping on to things in the here and now. If I had your endless years . . . no, scratch out the eyes of that thought. I don't want them. I've lived too long as it is.'

Spinnock's mind was spinning. The High Priestess? 'No, she doesn't. Love me, I mean. I didn't mean her, anyway.'

'Gods below, Spinnock Durav, you're a damned fool.'

'I know that. I've as much as confessed it, for Hood's sake.'

'So you're not interested in making the High Priestess happier than she's been in a thousand years. Fine. That's your business. Some other woman, then. Careful, someone might up and murder her. Jealousy is deadly.'

This was too off-hand for Seerdomin, too loose, too careless. It had the sound of a man who had surrendered to despair, no longer caring – about anything. Loosing every arrow in his quiver, eager to see it suddenly, fatally empty. This Seerdomin frightened Spinnock. 'What have you been up to?' he asked.

'I have been murdering people.' He poured another round, then settled back in his chair. 'Eleven so far. They saw themselves as liberators. Scheming the downfall of their Tiste Andii oppressors. I answered their prayers and liberated every one of them. This is my penance, Spinnock Durav. My singular apology for the madness of humanity. Forgive them, please, because I cannot.'

Spinnock found a tightness in his throat that started tears in his eyes. He could not so much as look at this man, dared not, lest he see all that should never be revealed, never be exposed. Not in his closest friend. Not in anyone. 'That,' he said, hating his own words, 'was not necessary.'

'Strictly speaking, you are right, friend. They would have failed – I lack no faith in your efficacy, especially that of your Lord. Understand, I did this out of a desire to prove that, on occasion, we are capable of policing our own. Checks and balances. This way the blood stains my hands, not yours. Giving no one else cause for hating you.'

'Those who hate need little cause, Seerdomin.'

The man nodded – Spinnock caught the motion peripherally.

There was a silence. The tale had been told, Spinnock recalled, more than once. How the Bridgeburner named Whiskeyjack – a man Anomander Rake called friend – had intervened in the slaughter of the Pannion witches, the mad mothers of Children of the Dead Seed. Whiskeyjack, a human, had sought to grant the Son of Darkness a gift, taking away the burden of the act. A gesture that had shaken his Lord to the core. *It is not in our nature to permit others to share our burden.*

*Yet we will, unhesitatingly, take on theirs.*

'I wonder if we blazed his trail.'

'What?'

Spinnock rubbed at his face, feeling slightly drunk.

'Itkovian's.'

'Of course you didn't. The Grey Swords—' 'Possessed a Shield Anvil, yes, but they were not unique in that. It's an ancient title. Are we the dark mirror to such people?' Then he shook his head. 'Probably not. That would be a grand conceit.'

'I agree,' Seerdomin said in a slurred growl.

'I love her.'

'So you claimed. And presumably she will not have you.'

'Very true.'

'So here you sit, getting drunk.'

'Yes.'

'Once I myself am drunk enough, Spinnock Durav, I will do what's needed.'

'What's needed?'

'Why, I will go and tell her she's a damned fool.'

'You'd fail.'

'I would?'

Spinnock nodded. 'She's faced you down before. Unflinchingly.'

Another stretch of silence. That stretched on, and on.

He was drunk enough now to finally shift his gaze, to fix his attention on Seerdomin's face.

It was a death mask, white as dust. 'Where is she?' the man asked in a raw, strained voice.

'On her way back out to the barrow, I should think. Seerdomin, I am sorry. I did not lie when I said I was a fool—'

'You were,' and he rose, weaving slightly before steadying himself with both hands on the back of his chair. 'But not in the way you think.'

'She didn't want my help,' Spinnock Durav said.

'And I would not give her mine.'

'Your choice—'

'You should not have listened, my friend. To her. *You should not have listened to her!'*

Spinnock stood as Seerdomin spun round and marched for the door. He was suddenly without words, numbed, stunned into confusion. *What have I done?*

*What have I not done?*

But his friend was gone.

In her irritation, Samar Dev discovered traits in herself that did not please. There was no reason to resent the manner in which her two companions found so much pleasure in each other's company. The way they spoke freely, unconstrained by decorum, unaffected even by the fact that they barely knew one another, and the way the subjects flowed in any and every direction, flung on whims of mood, swirling round heady topics like eddies round jagged rocks. Most infuriating of all, they struck on moments of laughter, and she well knew – *damn the gods, she was certain* – that neither man possessed such ease of humour, that they were so far removed from that characterization that she could only look on in stunned disbelief.

They spoke of their respective tribes, traded tales of sexual conquests. They spoke of weapons and neither hesitated in handing over his sword for the other to examine and, indeed, try a few experimental swings and passes with. Traveller told of a friend of old named Ereko, a Tartheno of such pure, ancient blood that he would have towered over Karsa Orlong had the two been standing side by side. And in that story Samar Dev sensed deep sorrow, wounds of such severity that it was soon apparent that Traveller himself could not venture too close, and so his tale of Ereko reached no conclusion. And Karsa Orlong did not press, revealing his clear understanding that a soul could bleed from unseen places and often all that kept a mortal going depended on avoiding such places.

He reciprocated in his speaking of the two companions who had accompanied him on an ill-fated raid into the settled lands of humans, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Whose souls, Karsa blithely explained, now dwelt within the stone of his sword.

Traveller simply grunted at that detail, and then said, 'That is a worthy place.'

By the second day of this, Samar Dev was ready to scream. Tear her hair from her head, spit blood and curses and teeth and maybe her entire stomach by the time she was done. And so she held her silence, and held on to her fury, like a rabid beast chained to the ground. It was absurd. Pathetic and ridiculous, this crass envy she was feeling. Besides, had she not learned more about both men since their fateful meeting than she had ever known before? Like a tickbird flitting between two bull bhederin, her attention was drawn to first one, then the other. While the peace lasted it would do to say nothing, to make no commotion no matter how infuriated she happened to be.

They rode on, across the vast plain, along a worn caravan track angling into the Cinnamon Wastes. Those few merchant trains they met or overtook were singularly taciturn, the guards edgy, the traders unwelcoming. Just before dusk last night, four horsemen had passed close by their camp, and, after a long look, had ridden on without a word ventured.

Karsa had sneered and said, 'See that, Samar Dev? As my grandfather used to say, "The wolf does not smell the bear's anus."'

'Your grandfather,' Traveller had replied, 'was an observant man.'

'Mostly he was a fool, but even fools could spout tribal wisdom.' And he turned to Samar Dev again. 'You are safe, witch.'

'From other people, yes,' she had growled in reply.

And the bastard had laughed.

The Cinnamon Wastes were well named. One species of deep-rooted grass quickly predominated, rust-red and hip-high, with serrated edges and thorny seed-pods on thin wavering stalks. Small red-banded lizards

swarmed these grasses, tails whipping and rustling as they scattered from their path. The land levelled until not a single rise or hill was in sight.

Amidst this monotony, Traveller and Karsa Orlong seemed intent on wearing out their vocal cords.

'Few recall,' Traveller was saying, 'the chaos of the Malazan Empire in those early days. The madness only *began* with Kellanved, the Emperor. His first cadre of lieutenants were all Napan, each one secretly sworn to a young woman named Surly, who was heiress to the crown of the Nap Isles – in hiding ever since the Untan conquest.' He paused. 'Or so goes the tale. Was it true? Was Surly truly the last of the Napan royal line? Who can say, but it came in handy when she changed her name to Laseen and attained the throne of the Empire. In any case, those lieutenants were crocked, every one of them. Urko, Crust, Nok, all of them. Quick to fanaticism, willing to do anything and everything to advance the Empire.'

'The Empire, or Surly?' asked Karsa Orlong. 'Does it not seem just as likely that they were simply using Kellanved?'

'A fair suspicion, except that only Nok remained once Laseen became Empress. The others each . . . drowned.'

'Drowned?'

'Officially. That cause of death quickly became euphemistic. Put it this way. They *disappeared.'* 'There was someone else,' Samar Dev said.

'Dancer—'

'Not him, Traveller. There was the First Sword. There was Dassem Ultor, commander of all the Emperor's armies. He was not Napan. He was Dal Honese.'

Traveller glanced across at her. 'He fell in Seven Cities, shortly before Laseen took power.'

'Surly had him assassinated,' said Samar Dev.

Karsa Orlong grunted. 'Eliminating potential rivals – she needed to clear the path. That, witch, is neither savage nor civilized. You will see such

things in dirt-nosed tribes and in empires both. This truth belongs to power.'

'I would not dispute your words, Toblakai. Do you want to know what happened after you killed Emperor Rhulad?'

'The Tiste Edur quit the Empire.'

'How – how did you know that?'

He bared his teeth. 'I guessed, witch.'

'Just like that?'

'Yes. They did not want to be there.'

Traveller said, 'I expect the Tiste Edur discovered rather quickly the curse of occupation. It acts like a newly opened wound, infecting and poisoning both the oppressors and the oppressed. Both cultures become malformed, bitter with extremes. Hatred, fear, greed, betrayal, paranoia, and appalling indifference to suffering.'

'Yet the Malazans occupied Seven Cities—'

'No, Samar Dev. The Malazans conquered Seven Cities.

That is different. Kellanved understood that much. If one must grip hard in enemy territory, then that grip must be hidden – at the very cusp of local power. And so no more than a handful is being strictly controlled – everyone else, merchants and herders and farmers and tradefolk – everyone – is to be shown better circumstances, as quickly as possible. "Conquer as a rogue wave, rule in quiet ripples." The Emperor's own words.'

'This is what the Claw did, isn't it? Infiltrate and paralyse the rulers—'

'The less blood spilled, the better.'

Karsa Orlong barked a laugh. 'That depends,' he said.

'There are other kinds of conquest.'

'Such as?'

'Traveller, my friend, you speak of conquest as a means of increasing one's power – the more subjects and the more cities under your control is the measure of that power. But what of the power of destruction?'

Samar Dev found she was holding her breath, and she watched Traveller considering Karsa's words, before he said, 'There is nothing then to be gained.'

'You are wrong,' said Karsa, pausing to stretch his back. Havok's head tossed, a chopping motion like an axe blade. 'I have looked upon the face of civilization, and I am not impressed.'

'There is no flaw in being critical.'

'He's not just being critical,' said Samar Dev. 'He intends to destroy it. Civilization, I mean. The whole thing, from sea to sea. When Karsa Orlong is done, not a single city in the world will remain standing, isn't that right, Toblakai?'

'I see no value in modest ambitions, witch.'

Traveller was quiet then, and the silence was like an expanding void, until even the moan of the incessant wind seemed distant and hollow.

*Gods, how often have I wished him well? Even as the thought horrifies me – he would kill millions. He would crush every symbol of progress. From ploughs back to sticks. From bricks to caves. From iron to stone. Crush us all back into the ground, the mud of waterholes. And the beasts will hunt us, and those of us who remain, why, we will hunt each other.*

Traveller finally spoke. 'I dislike cities,' he said.

'Barbarians both,' she muttered under her breath.

Neither man responded. Perhaps they hadn't heard. She shot each of them a quick glance, right and then left, and saw that both were smiling.

Riding onward, the day rustling in waves of red grass.

Until Traveller once again began speaking. 'The first law of the multitude is conformity. Civilization is the mechanism of controlling and maintaining

that multitude. The more civilized a nation, the more conformed its population, until that civilization's last age arrives, when multiplicity wages war with conformity. The former grows ever wilder, ever more dysfunctional in its extremities; whilst the latter seeks to increase its measure of control, until such efforts acquire diabolical tyranny.'

'More of Kellanved?' Samar Dev asked.

Traveller snorted. 'Hardly. That was Duiker, the Imperial Historian.'

Through the course of the night just past, Nimander Golit had led his meagre troupe through the city of Bastion. Children of Darkness, with Aranatha's quiet power embracing them, they had moved in silence, undetected as far as they could tell, for no alarms were raised. The city was a thing seemingly dead, like a closed flower.

At dusk, shortly before they set out, they had heard clattering commotion out on the main avenue, and went to the gates to watch the arrival into the city of scores of enormous wagons. Burdened with trade goods, the carters slack-faced, exhausted, with haunted eyes above brown-stained mouths. Bales of raw foodstuffs, casks of figs and oils, eels packed in salt, smoked bhederin, spiced mutton, and countless other supplies that had been eagerly pressed upon them in exchange for the barrels of kelyk.

There was cruel irony to be found in the sordid disinterest the locals displayed before such essential subsistence – most were past the desire for food. Most were starving in an ecstatic welter of saemankelyk, the black ink of a god's pain.

The Tiste Andii wore their armour. They wore their gear for fighting, for killing. Nimander did not need a glance back to know the transformation and what it did to the expressions on all but one of the faces of those trailing behind him. Skintick, whose smile had vanished, yet his eyes glittered bright, as if fevered. Kedeviss, ever rational, now wore a mask of madness, beauty twisted into something terrible. Nenanda, for all his postures of ferocity, was now ashen, colourless, as if the truth of desire soured him with poison. Desra, flushed with something like excitement.

Only Aranatha was unchanged. Placid, glassy-eyed with concentration, her features somehow softer, blurred.

Skintick and Kedeviss carried Clip between them. Nenanda held over one shoulder the man's weapons, his bow and quiver, his sword and knife belt – all borne on a single leather strap that could be loosed in a moment should the need arise.

They had slipped past buildings in which worshippers danced, starved limbs waving about, distended bellies swaying – doors had been left open, shutters swung back to the night. Voices moaned in disjointed chorus. Even those faces that by chance turned towards the Tiste Andii as they moved ghostly past did not awaken with recognition, the eyes remaining dull, empty, unseeing.

The air was warm, smelling of rancid salt from the dying lake mixed with the heavier stench of putrefying corpses.

They reached the edge of the central square, looked out across its empty expanse. The altar itself was dark, seemingly lifeless.

Nimander crouched down, uncertain. There must be watchers. It would be madness to think otherwise. Could they reach the altar before some hidden mob rushed forth to accost them? It did not seem likely. They had not seen Kallor since his march to the altar the previous day. Nenanda believed the old man was dead. He believed they would find his body, cold and pale, lying on the tiled floor somewhere within the building. For some reason, Nimander did not think that likely.

Skintick whispered behind him, 'Well? It's nearing dawn, Nimander.'

What awaited them? There was only one way to find out. 'Let's go.'

All at once, with their first strides out into the concourse, the air seemed to swirl, thick and heavy. Nimander found he had to push against it, a tightness forming in his throat and then his chest.

'They're burning the shit,' Skintick hissed. 'Can you smell it? The kelyk—'

'Quiet.'

Fifteen, twenty paces now. Silence all around. Nimander set his eyes on the entrance to the altar, the steps glistening with dew or something far worse. The black glyphs seemed to throb in his eyes, as if the entire structure was breathing. He could feel something dark and unpleasant in his veins, like bubbles in his blood, or seeds, eager to burst into life. He felt moments from losing control.

Behind him, hard gasping breaths – they were all feeling this, they were all—

'Behind us,' grunted Nenanda.

And to the sides, crowds closing in from every street and alley mouth, slowly, dark shapes pushing into the square. *They look like the scarecrows, cut loose from their stakes – Mother's blessing—*

Forty strides, reaching the centre of the concourse. Every avenue closed to them now, barring that to the building itself.

'We're being herded,' said Kedeviss, her voice tight. 'They want us inside.'

Nimander glanced back, down upon the limp form of Clip, the man's head hanging and hair trailing on the ground. Clip's eyes were half open. 'Is he still alive?'

'Barely,' said Kedeviss.

Hundreds of figures drew yet closer, blackened eyes gleaming, mouths hanging open. Knives, hatchets, pitchforks and hammers dangled down from their hands. The only sound that came from them was the shuffle of their bare feet.

Twenty paces now from the steps. To the right and left, and in their wake, the worshippers in the front lines began lifting their weapons, then those behind them followed suit.

'Skintick,' said Nimander, 'take Clip by yourself. Aranatha, his weapons. Desra, ward your sister. Kedeviss, Nenanda, prepare to rearguard – once we're inside, hold them at the entrance.'

Two against a thousand or more. Fanatics, fearless and senseless – *gods, we are unleashed.*

He heard a pair of swords rasp free of scabbards. The sound sliced through the air, and it was as if the cold iron touched his brow, startling him awake.

The crowd was close now, a bestial growl rising.

Nimander reached the first step. 'Now!'

They rushed upward. Skintick was immediately behind Nimander, Clip on his hunched back as he gripped one wrist and one thigh. Then Aranatha, flowing up the steps like an apparition, Desra in her wake. Nenanda and Kedeviss, facing the opposite way with swords held ready, backed up more slowly.

The front ranks of worshippers moaned and then surged forward.

Iron rang, clashed, thudded into flesh and bone. Nimander plunged through the entranceway. There was no light – every torch in its sconce had been capped – yet his eyes could penetrate the gloom, in time to see a score of priests rushing for him.

Shouting a warning, Nimander unsheathed his sword—

The fools were human. In this darkness they were half blind. He slashed out, saw a head roll off shoulders, the body crumpling. A back swing intercepted an arm thrusting a dagger at his chest. The sword's edge sliced through wrist bones and the severed hand, still gripping the weapon, thumped against his chest before falling away. Angling the sword point back across his torso, Nimander stabbed the one-handed priest in the throat.

In his peripheral vision he caught Clip's form rolling on to the floor as Skintick freed his arms to defend himself.

The sickly sound of edge biting meat echoed in the chamber, followed by the spatter of blood across tiles.

Nimander stop-thrust another charging priest, the point pushing hard between ribs and piercing the man's heart. As he fell he sought to trap the

sword but Nimander twisted round and with a savage tug tore his weapon free.

A knife scraped the links of his chain hauberk beneath his left arm and he pulled away and down, cross-stabbing and feeling the sword punch into soft flesh. Stomach acids spurted up the blade and stung his knuckles. The priest folded round the wound. Nimander kicked hard into his leg, shin-high, breaking bones. As the man sagged away, he pushed forward to close against yet another one.

Sword against dagger was no contest. As the poor creature toppled, sobbing from a mortal wound, Nimander whipped his sword free and spun to meet the next attacker.

There were none left standing.

Skintick stood nearby, slamming his still bloodied sword back into the scabbard at his belt, then crouching to retrieve Clip. Desra, weapon dripping, hovered close to Aranatha who, unscathed, walked past, gaze fixed on the set of ornate doors marking some grand inner entranceway. After a moment Desra followed.

From the outer doors the frenzied sounds of fighting continued, human shrieks echoing, bouncing in crazed cacophony. Nimander looked back to see that Kedeviss and Nenanda still held the portal, blood and bile spreading beneath their boots to trace along the indents and impressions of the tiles. Nimander stared at that detail, transfixed, until a nudge from Skintick shook him free.

'Come on,' Nimander said in a rasp, setting out into Aranatha's wake.

Desra felt her entire body surging with life. Not even sex could match this feeling. A score of insane priests rushing upon them, and the three of them simply cut them all down. With barely a catch of breath – she had seen Nimander slaughter the last few, with such casual grace that she could only look on in wonder. Oh, he believed himself a poor swordsman, and perhaps when compared to Nenanda, or Kedeviss, he was indeed not their equal. Even so – *Bastion, your children should never have challenged us. Should never have pushed us to this.*

*Now see what you've done.*

She hurried after her brainless sister.

Skintick wanted to weep, but he knew enough to save that for later, for that final stumble through, into some future place when all this was over and done with, when they could each return to a normal life, an almost peaceful life.

He had never been one for prayers, especially not to Mother Dark, whose heart was cruel, whose denial was an ever-bleeding wound in the Tiste Andii. Yet he prayed none the less. Not to a god or goddess, not to some unknown force at ease with the gift of mercy. No, Skintick prayed for *peace*.

A world of calm.

He did not know if such a world existed, anywhere. He did not know if one such as he deserved that world. Paradise belonged to the innocent.

Which was why it was and would ever remain . . . empty.

*And* that *is what makes it a paradise.*

At the outer doors, the slaughter continued. Kedeviss saw Nenanda smiling, and had she the time, she would have slapped him. Hard. Hard enough to shake the glee from his eyes. There was nothing glorious in this. The fools came on and on, crushing each other in their need, and she and Nenanda killed them one by one by one.

Oh, fighting against absurd odds was something they were used to; something they did damnably well. That was no source of pride. Desperate defence demanded expedience and little else. And the Tiste Andii were, above all else, an expedient people.

And so blood spilled down, bodies crumpled at their feet, only to be dragged clear by the next ones to die.

She killed her twentieth worshipper, and he was no different from the nineteenth, no different from the very first one, back there on the steps.

Blood like rain. Blood like tears. It was all so pointless.

Nenanda began laughing.

Moments later, the worshippers changed their tactics.

With frenzied screams they pushed forward en masse, and those Nenanda and Kedeviss mortally wounded were simply heaved ahead, dying, flailing shields of flesh and bone. As the mob drove onward, the two Tiste Andii were forced from the threshold—

And the attackers poured in with triumphant shrieks.

Nenanda stopped laughing.

Nimander was at the inner doorway when he heard the savage cries behind him. Spinning round, he saw Nenanda and Kedeviss retreating under an onslaught of maddened figures.

'Skintick!'

His cousin shifted Clip's body on to Nimander's shoulders, then turned and, drawing his sword once more, plunged into the mêlée.

Nimander staggered into the passageway.

*Why? Why are we doing this? We deliver Clip to the Dying God, like a damned sacrifice.* Ahead, he saw Desra and Aranatha approaching the far end, where it seemed there was another chamber. *The altar room – where he awaits us*— 'Stop!' he shouted.

Only Desra glanced back.

Aranatha strode within.

The reek of burning kelyk assailed Nimander and he stumbled as he moved forward beneath the slack, dragging weight of Clip's unconscious form. The raw glyphs swarmed on the walls to either side. Projecting busts of some past deity showed battered faces, sections crushed and others sheared off by recent demolition. Lone eyes leered down. Half-mouths smiled with a jester's crook. Passing by one after another.

Trembling, Nimander forced himself forward. He saw Desra stride after Aranatha.

The glyphs began weeping, and all at once he felt as if time itself was dissolving. Sudden blindness, the terrible sounds of fighting behind him diminishing, as if pulled far away, until only the rush of blood remained, a storm in his head.

Through which, faintly and then rising, came a child's voice. Singing softly.

Seerdomin emerged from Night, squinted against the mid-morning glare. Silver clouds ahead, heaped above the barrow like the sky's detritus. Rain slanted down on the mound.

Tulwar in his hand, he hurried on, boots slipping in the salt-crusted mud of the track.

She had gone out, alone.

Spinnock Durav – the only friend he had left – had professed his love for her. But he had not understood – yes, she would refuse his help. But such refusal must be denied. He should have comprehended that.

Gods below, this was not Seerdomin's fight. *She* was not his fight.

Yet he found himself driven on, cold with fear, feverish with dread, and everything that he saw around him seemed to scream its details, as if even the mundane truths could burn, could sting like acid in his eyes. Ruts and broken spokes, potsherds, pools of opaque water, exposed roots like the hackles of the earth – each one ferociously demanding his attention. *We are as it is*, they seemed to shout, *we are all there is! We are—*

Not his fight, but Spinnock had not understood. He was Tiste Andii. He was a creature of centuries and what was avoided one day could be addressed later – decades, millennia, *ages* later. In their eyes, nothing changed.

Nothing *could* change. They were a fallen people. The dream of getting back up had faded to dust.

She had gone out. Alone. Out where the conspirators strutted in the light of day, insanely plotting the return of suffering. Where they abused the sanctuary of an indifferent god. Maybe she was now back among her kind – if that was true, then Spinnock Durav deserved to hear the truth of that.

A rat slithered into the ditch a few strides ahead. He drew closer to the filth of the encampment, its stench so foul not even the rain could wash it away.

Would he be challenged? He hoped so. If the conspirators hid themselves, he might have trouble rooting them out. And if *she* decided to hide, well, he would have to kick through every decrepit hut and shelter, into every leaking tent and rust-seized wagon.

Birdsong drifted down from the trees of the slope on the opposite side of the camp, the sound startlingly clear. Tendrils of smoke from rain-dampened hearths undulated upward, each one solid as a serpent in Seerdomin's eyes. He was, he realized, walking into their nest.

*But Spinnock, you need not do this, you need not even know of this. This is a human affair, and if she is willing then yes, I will drag her free of it. Back to you. One can be saved and that should be enough.*

He wondered if the Redeemer ever saw things that way. Taking one soul into his embrace with a thousand yearning others looking on – but no, he did not choose, did not select one over another. He took them all.

Seerdomin realized he did not care either way. This god was not for him. Redemption had never been his reason for kneeling before that barrow. *I was lonely. I thought he might be the same. Damn you, High Priestess, why didn't you just leave me alone?*

*Not my mess.*

*Spinnock, you owe me, and you will never know. I will say nothing – let this rain wash the blood from my hands—*

He had begun this march half drunk, but nothing of that remained. Now, everything was on fire.

Reaching the slope of the camp's main avenue, he began the ascent. The rain was fine as mist, yet he was quickly soaked through, steam rising from his forearms. The ground gave queasily beneath his boots with every step. He arrived at the crest leaning far forward, scrabbling in his haste.

Straightening, something flashed into his vision. He heard a snap, a crunch that exploded in his head, and then nothing.

Gradithan stood over the sprawled form of Seerdomin, staring down at the smashed, bloodied face. Monkrat crept closer and crouched down beside the body.

'He lives. He will drown in his blood if I do not roll him over, Urdo. What is your wish?'

'Yes, push him over – I want him alive, for now at least. Take his weapons, bind his limbs, then drag him to the Sacred Tent.'

Gradithan licked his lips, tasting the staleness of dried kelyk. He wanted more, fresh, bitter and sweet, but he needed his mind. Sharp, awake, aware of everything.

As Monkrat directed two of his Urdomen to attend to the Seerdomin, Gradithan set off for the Sacred Tent. Sanctified ground, yes, but only temporary. Soon, they would have the barrow itself. The barrow, and the ignorant godling within it.

Along the track, the once-worshippers of the Redeemer knelt as he passed. Some moaned in the dregs of the night's dance. Others stared at the mud in front of their knees, heads hanging, brown slime drooling down from their gaping mouths. Oh, this might seem like corruption, but Gradithan wasn't interested in such misconceptions.

The Dying God was more important than Black Coral and its morose overlords. More important than the Redeemer and his pathetic cult. The Dying God's song was a song of pain, and was not pain the curse of mortality?

He had heard of another cult, a foreign one, devoted to someone called the Crippled God.

*Perhaps*, Monkrat had ventured that morning, *there is a trend.*

There was something blasphemous in that observation, and Gradithan reminded himself that he would have to have the mage beaten – but not yet. Gradithan needed Monkrat, at least for now.

He entered the Sacred Tent.

Yes, she was still dancing, writhing now on the earthen floor, too exhausted perhaps to stand, yet the sensual motions were still powerful enough to take away Gradithan's breath. It did not matter any more that she had been a Child of the Dead Seed. No one could choose their parents, after all. Besides, she had been adopted now. By the Dying God, by the blessed pain and ecstasy it delivered.

Let her dance on, yes, until the gate was forced open.

Gradithan lifted his head, sniffed the air – oh, the blood was being spilled, the sacrifice fast closing on the threshold. *Close now.*

The Dying God bled. Mortal followers drank that blood. Then spilled it out, transformed, so that the Dying God could take it once more within himself. This was the secret truth behind all blood sacrifice. The god gives and the mortal gives back. All the rest . . . nothing more than ornate dressing, nothing more than obfuscation.

*Die, my distant friends. Die in your multitudes. We are almost there.*

'You are dying.'

Seerdomin opened his eyes. An unfamiliar face stared down at him.

'You are bleeding into your brain, Segda Travos. They mean to abuse you. Torture you with terrible sights – the Urdo named Gradithan believes you a traitor. He wants you to suffer, but you will deny him that pleasure, for you are dying.'

'Who – what . . .'

'I am Itkovian. I am the Redeemer.'

'I – I am sorry.'

The man smiled and Seerdomin could see how that smile belonged to these gentle features, the kind eyes. Such compassion was . . . *'Wrong'*.

'Perhaps it seems that way, but you are strong – your spirit is very strong, Segda Travos. You believe I am without true compassion. You believe I embrace suffering out of selfish need, to feed a hunger, an addiction.' Itkovian's soft eyes shifted away. 'Perhaps you are right.'

Seerdomin slowly sat up. And saw a domed sky that glittered as if with millions upon millions of stars, a solid cluster vying for every space, so that every splinter and whorl of darkness seemed shrunken, in retreat. The vision made his head spin and he quickly looked down. And found he was kneeling on a ground composed entirely of coins. Copper, tin, brass, a few sprinkles of silver, fewer still of gold. Gems gleamed here and there. 'We are,' he said in an awed whisper, 'within your barrow.'

'Yes?' said Itkovian.

Seerdomin shot the god a quick glance. 'You did not know . . .'

'Is knowing necessary, Segda Travos?'

'I no longer use that name. Segda Travos is dead. I am Seerdomin.'

'Warrior Priest of the Pannion Seer. I see the warrior within you, but not the priest.'

'It seems I am not much of a warrior any more,' Seerdomin observed. 'I was coming to save her.'

'And now, my friend, you must fight her.'

'What?'

Itkovian pointed.

Seerdomin twisted round where he knelt. A storm was building, seeping up into the dome of offerings, and he saw how the blackness engulfed those blazing stars, drowning them one by one. Beneath the savage churning clouds there was a figure. Dancing. And with each wild swing of an arm more midnight power spun outward, up into the growing stormcloud. She

seemed to be a thousand or more paces away, yet grew larger by the moment.

He could see her mouth, gaping like a pit, from which vile liquid gushed out, splashing down, spraying as she twirled.

*Salind. Gods, what has happened to you?*

'She wants me,' Itkovian said. 'It is her need, you see.'

'Her need?'

'Yes. For answers. What more can a god fear, but a mortal demanding answers?'

'Send her away!'

'I cannot. So, warrior, will you defend me?'

'I cannot fight that!'

'Then, my friend, I am lost.'

Salind came closer, and as she did so she seemed to lose focus in Seerdomin's eyes, her limbs smearing the air, her body blurring from one position to the next. Her arms seemed to multiply, and in each one, he now saw, she held a weapon. Brown-stained iron, knotted wood trailing snags of hair, daggers of obsidian, scythes of crimson bronze.

Above her stained, weeping mouth, her eyes blazed with insane fire.

'Redeemer,' whispered Seerdomin.

'Yes?'

'Answer me one question. I beg you.'

'Ask.'

And he faced the god. *'Are you worth it?'*

'Am I worth the sacrifice you must make? No, I do not think so.'

'You will not beg to be saved?'

Itkovian smiled. 'Will you?'

*No. I never have.* He rose to his feet, found that the tulwar remained in his hand. He hefted the weapon and eyed Salind. *Can I defy her need? Can I truly stand against that?* 'If not for your humility, Redeemer, I would walk away. If not for your . . . uncertainty, your doubts, your *humanity.'*

And, awaiting no reply from the god, he set out into her path.

The sudden hush within the Scour Tavern finally penetrated Spinnock Durav's drunken haze. Blinking, he tilted his head, and found himself looking up at his Lord.

Who said, 'It is time, my friend.'

'You now send me away?' Spinnock asked.

'Yes. I now send you away.'

Spinnock Durav reeled upright. His face was numb. The world seemed a sickly place, and it wanted in. He drew a deep breath.

'My request pains you – why?'

He could have told him then. He could have spoken of this extraordinary blessing of love. For a human woman. He could have told Anomander Rake of his failure, and in so doing he would have awakened the Son of Darkness to his sordid plight.

Had he done all of this, Anomander Rake would have reached a hand to rest light on his shoulder, and he would have said, *Then you must stay, my friend. For love, you must stay – go to her, now. Now, Spinnock Durav. It is the last gift within our reach. The last – did you truly believe I would stand in the way of that? That I would decide that my need was greater?*

*Did you think I could do such a thing, when I come to you here and now because of my own love? For you? For our people?*

*Go to her, Spinnock Durav. Go.*

But Spinnock Durav said nothing. Instead, he bowed before his Lord. 'I shall do as you ask.'

And Anomander Rake said, 'It is all right to fail, friend. I do not demand the impossible of you. Do not weep at that moment. For me, Spinnock Durav, find a smile to announce the end. Fare well.'

*

The killing seemed without end. Skintick's sword arm ached, the muscles lifeless and heavy, and still they kept coming on – faces twisted eager and desperate, expressions folding round mortal wounds as if sharp iron was a blessing touch, an exquisite gift. He stood between Kedeviss and Nenanda, and the three had been driven back to the second set of doors. Bodies were piled in heaps, filling every space of the chamber's floor, where blood and fluids formed thick pools. The walls on all sides were splashed high.

He could see daylight through the outer doors – the morning was dragging on. Yet from the passage at their backs there had been . . . nothing. Were they all dead in there? Bleeding out on the altar stone? Or had they found themselves somehow trapped, or lost with no answers – was Clip now dead, or had he been delivered into the Dying God's hands?

The attackers were running out of space – too many corpses – and most now crawled or even slithered into weapon range.

'Something's wrong,' gasped Kedeviss. 'Skintick – go – we can hold them off now. Go – find out if . . .'

*If we're wasting our time. I understand.* He pulled back, one shoulder cracking into the frame of the entranceway. Whirling, he set off along the corridor. When horror stalked the world, it seemed that every grisly truth was laid bare. Life's struggle ever ended in failure. No victory was pure, or clean. Triumph was a comforting lie and always revealed itself to be ephemeral, hollow and short-lived. This is what assailed the spirit when coming face to face with horror.

And so few understood that. So few . . .

He clawed through foul smoke, heard his own heartbeat slowing, dragging even as his breaths faded. *What – what is happening?* Blindness. Silence, an end to all motion. Skintick sought to push forward, only to find

that desire was empty when without will, and when there was no strength, will itself was a conceit. Glyphs flowed down like black rain, on his face, his neck and his hands, streaming hot as blood.

Somehow, he fought onward, his entire body dragging behind him as if half dead, an impediment, a thing worth forgetting. He wanted to pull free of it, even as he understood that his flesh was all that kept him alive – yet he yearned for dissolution, and that yearning was growing desperate.

*Wait. This is not how I see the world. This is not the game I choose to play – I will not believe in this abject . . . surrender.*

*It is what kelyk offers. The blood of the Dying God delivers escape – from everything that matters. The invitation is so alluring, the promise so entrancing.*

*Dance! All around you the world rots. Dance! Poison into your mouths and poison out from your mouths. Dance, damn you, in the dust of your dreams. I have looked into your eyes and I have seen that you are nothing. Empty.*

*Gods, such seductive invitation!*

The recognition sobered him, abrupt as a punch in the face. He found himself lying on the tiles of the corridor, the inner doors almost within reach. In the chamber beyond darkness swirled like thick smoke, like a storm trapped beneath the domed ceiling. He heard singing, soft, the voice of a child.

He could not see Nimander, or Desra or Aranatha. The body of Clip was sprawled not five paces in, face upturned, eyes opened, fixed and seemingly sightless.

Trembling with weakness, Skintick pulled himself forward.

The moment he had bulled his way into the altar chamber, Nimander had felt something tear, as if he had plunged through gauze-thin cloth. From the seething storm he had plunged into, he emerged to sudden calm, to soft light and gentle currents of warm air. His first step landed on something lumpy that twisted beneath his weight. Looking down, he saw a small doll

of woven grasses and twigs. And, scattered on the floor all round, there were more such figures. Some of strips of cloth, others of twine, polished wood and fired clay. Most were broken – missing limbs, or headless. Others hung down from the plain, low ceiling, twisted beneath nooses of leather string, knotted heads tilted over, dark liquid dripping.

The wordless singing was louder here, seeming to emanate from all directions. Nimander could see no walls – just floor and ceiling, both stretching off into formless white.

And dolls, thousands of dolls. On the floor, dangling from the ceiling.

'Show yourself,' said Nimander.

The singing stopped.

'Show yourself to me.'

'If you squeeze them,' said the voice – a woman's or a young boy's – 'they leak. I squeezed them all. Until they broke.' There was a pause, and then a soft sigh. 'None worked.'

Nimander did not know where to look – the mangled apparitions hanging before him filled him with horror now, as he saw their similarity to the scarecrows of the fields outside Bastion. *They are the same. They weren't planted rows, nothing made to deliver a yield. They were . . . versions.*

'Yes. Failing one by one – it's not fair. How did he do it?'

'What are you?' Nimander asked.

The voice grew sly, 'On the floor of the Abyss – yes, there *is* a floor – there are the fallen. Gods and goddesses, spirits and prophets, disciples and seers, heroes and queens and kings – *junk* of existence. You can play there. I did. Do you want to? Do you want to play there, too?'

'No.'

'All broken, more broken than me.'

'They call you the Dying God.'

'All gods are dying.'

'But you are no god, are you?'

'Down on the floor, you never go hungry. Am I a god now? I must be. Don't you see? I ate so many of them. So many parts, pieces. Oh, their power, I mean. My body didn't need food. Doesn't need it, I mean, yes, that is fair to say. It is so fair to say. I first met him on the floor – he was exploring, he said, and I had travelled so far . . . so far.'

'Your worshippers—'

'Are mostly dead. More to drink. All that blood, enough to make a river, and the current can take me away from here, can bring me back. All the way back. To make her *pay for what she did*!'

Having come from chaos, it was no surprise that the god was insane. 'Show yourself.'

'The machine was broken, but I didn't know that. I rode its back, up and up. But then something happened. An accident. We fell a long way. We were terribly broken, both of us. When they dragged me out. Now I need to make a new version, just like you said. And you have brought me one. It will do. I am not deaf to its thoughts. I understand its chaos, its pains and betrayals. I even understand its arrogance. It will do, it will do.'

'You cannot have him,' said Nimander. 'Release him.'

'None of these ones worked. All the power just leaks out. How did he do it?'

*One of these dolls. He is one of these dolls. Hiding in the multitude.*

The voice began singing again. Wordless, formless.

He drew his sword.

'What are you doing?'

The iron blade slashed outward, chopping through the nearest figures. Strings cut, limbs sliced away, straw and grass drifting in the air.

A cackle, and then: 'You want to *find* me? How many centuries do you have to spare?'

'As many as I need,' Nimander replied, stepping forward and swinging again. Splintering wood, shattering clay. Underfoot he ground his heel into another figure.

'I'll be gone long before then. The river of blood you provided me – my way out. Far away I go! You can't see it, can you? The gate you've opened here. You can't even see it.'

Nimander destroyed another half-dozen dolls.

'Never find me! Never find me!'

A savage blur of weapons as Salind charged Seerdomin.

Each blow he caught with his tulwar, and each blow thundered up his arm, shot agony through his bones. He reeled back beneath the onslaught. Three steps, five, ten. It was all he could do simply to defend himself. And that, he knew, could not last.

The Redeemer wanted him to hold against this?

He struggled on, desperate.

She was moaning, a soft, yearning sound. A sound of *want*. Mace heads beat against his weapon, sword blades, the shafts of spears, flails, daggers, scythes – a dozen arms swung at him. Impacts thundered through his body.

He could not hold. He could not—

An axe edge tore into his left shoulder, angled up to slam into the side of his face. He felt his cheekbone and eye socket collapse inward. Blinded, Seerdomin staggered, attempting a desperate counter-attack, the tulwar slashing out. The edge bit into wood, splintering it. Something struck him high on his chest, snapping a clavicle. As his weapon arm sagged, suddenly lifeless, he reached across and took the sword with his other hand. Blood ran down from his shoulder – he was losing all strength.

Another edge chopped into him and he tottered, then fell on to his back.

Salind stepped up to stand directly over him.

He stared up into her dark, glittering eyes.

After a moment Nimander lowered his sword. The Dying God was right – this was pointless. 'Show yourself, you damned coward!'

Aranatha was suddenly at his side. 'He must be summoned,' she said.

'You expect him to offer us his name?'

The Dying God spoke. 'Who is here? *Who is here?'*

'I am the one,' answered Aranatha, 'who will summon you.'

'You do not know me. You cannot know me!'

'I know your path,' she replied. 'I know you spoke with the one named Hairlock, on the floor of the Abyss. And you imagined you could do the same, that you could fashion for yourself a body. Of wood, of twine, of clay —'

*'You don't know me!'*

'She discarded you,' said Aranatha, 'didn't she? The fragment of you that was left afterwards. Tainted child-like, abandoned.'

'You cannot know this – you were not there!' Aranatha frowned. 'No, I was not there. Yet . . . the earth trembled. Children woke. There was great need. You were the part of her . . . that she did not want.'

*'She will pay! And for you – I know you now – and it is too late!'*

Aranatha sighed. 'Husband, Blood Sworn to Nightchill,' she intoned, 'child of Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai, Bellurdan Skullcrusher, I summon you.' And she held out her hand, in time for something to slap hard into its grip. A battered, misshapen puppet dangled, one arm snapped off, both legs broken away at the knees, a face barely discernible, seemingly scorched by fire. Aranatha faced Nimander. 'Here is your Dying God.'

Around them the scene began dissolving, crumbling away.

'He does not speak,' Nimander said, eyeing the mangled puppet.

'No,' she said. 'Curious.'

'Are you certain you have him, Aranatha?'

She met his eyes, and then shrugged.

'What did he mean, that he *knew* you? And how – how did you know his name?'

She blinked, and then frowned down at the puppet she still held out in one hand. 'Nimander,' she whispered in a small voice, 'so much blood . . .'

Reaching out to Clip, Skintick dragged the man close, studied the face, the staring eyes, and saw something flicker to life. 'Clip?'

The warrior shifted his gaze, struggling to focus, and then he scowled. His words came out in an ugly croak. 'Fuck. What do you want?'

Sounds, motion, and then Nimander was there, kneeling on the other side of Clip. 'We seem,' he said, 'to have succeeded.'

'How?'

'I don't know, Skin. Right now, I don't know anything.'

Skintick saw Aranatha standing just near a massive block of stone – the altar. She was holding a doll or puppet of some sort. 'Where's Desra?' he suddenly asked, looking round.

'Over here.'

The foul smoke was clearing. Skintick lifted himself into a sitting position and squinted in the direction of the voice. In the wall behind the altar and to the left, almost hidden between columns, there was a narrow door, through which Desra now emerged. She was soaked in blood, although by the way she moved, none of it was her own. 'Some sort of High Priest, I suppose,' she said. 'Trying to protect a corpse, or what I think is a corpse.' She paused, and then spat on to the floor. 'Strung up like one of those scarecrows, but the body parts . . . all wrong, all sewn together—'

'The Dying God,' said Aranatha, 'sent visions of what he wanted. Flawed. But what leaked out tasted sweet.'

From the corridor Kedeviss and Nenanda arrived. They both looked round, their faces flat, their eyes bludgeoned.

'I think we killed them all,' said Kedeviss. 'Or the rest fled. This wasn't a fight – this was a slaughter. It made no sense—'

'Blood,' said Nimander, studying Clip – who remained lying before him – with something like suspicion. 'You are back with us?'

Clip swung his scowl on to Nimander. 'Where are we?'

'A city called Bastion.'

A strange silence followed, but it was one that Skintick understood. *The wake of our horror. It settles, thickens, forms a hard skin – something lifeless, smooth. We're waiting for it to finish all of that, until it can take our weight once more.*

*And then we leave here.*

'We still have far to go,' said Nimander, straightening.

In Skintick's eyes, his kin – his friend – looked aged, ravaged, his eyes haunted and bleak. The others were no better. None of them had wanted this. And what they had done here . . . it had all been for Clip.

'Blood,' said Clip, echoing Nimander, and he slowly climbed to his feet. He glared at the others. 'Look at you. By Mother Dark, I'd swear you've been rolling in the waste pits of some abattoir. Get cleaned up or you won't have my company for much longer.' He paused, and his glare hardened into something crueller. 'I smell murder. Human cults are pathetic things. From now on, spare me your lust for killing innocents. I'd rather not be reminded of whatever crimes you committed in the name of the Son of Darkness. Yes,' he added, baring his teeth, 'he has so much to answer for.'

Standing over him, weapons whirling, spinning. Seerdomin watched her with his one remaining eye, waiting for the end to all of this, an end he only faintly regretted. The failure, his failure, yes, that deserved some regret. But then, had he truly believed he could stop this apparition?

*He said I was dying.*

*I'm dying again.*

All at once, she was still. Her eyes like hooded lanterns, her arms settling as if the dance had danced its way right out of her and now spun somewhere unseen. She stared down at him without recognition, and then she turned away.

He heard her stumbling back the way she had come.

'That was long enough.'

Seerdomin turned his head, saw the Redeemer standing close. Not a large man. Not in any way particularly impressive. Hard enough, to be sure, revealing his profession as a soldier, but otherwise unremarkable. 'What made you what you are?' he asked – or tried to – his mouth filled with blood that frothed and spattered with every word.

The Redeemer understood him none the less. 'I don't know. We may possess ambition, and with it a self-image both grandiose and posturing, but they are empty things in the end.' Then he smiled. 'I do not recall being such a man.'

'Why did she leave, Redeemer?'

The answer was long in coming. 'You had help, I believe.

And no, I do not know what will come of that. Can you wait? I may need you again.'

Seerdomin managed a laugh. 'Like this?'

'I cannot heal you. But I do not think you will . . . cease. Yours is a strong soul, Seerdomin. May I sit down beside you? It has been a long time since I last had someone to speak to.'

*Well, here I bleed. But there is no pain.* 'As long as I can,' he said, 'you will have someone to speak to.'

The Redeemer looked away then, so that Seerdomin could not see his sudden tears.

'He didn't make it,' Monkrat said, straightening.

Gradithan glowered down at Seerdomin's corpse. 'We were so close, too. I don't understand what's happened, I don't understand at all.'

He turned slightly and studied the High Priestess where she knelt on the muddy floor of the tent. Her face was slack, black drool hanging from her mouth. 'She used it up. Too soon, too fast, I think. All that wasted blood . . .'

Monkrat cleared his throat. 'The visions—'

'Nothing now,' Gradithan snapped. 'Find some more kelyk.'

At that Salind's head lifted, a sudden thirst burning in her eyes. Seeing this, Gradithan laughed. 'Ah, see how she worships now. An end to all those doubts. One day, Monkrat, *everyone* will be like her. Saved.'

Monkrat seemed to hesitate.

Gradithan turned back and spat on to Seerdomin's motionless, pallid visage. 'Even you, Monkrat,' he said. 'Even you.'

'Would you have me surrender my talents as a mage, Urdo?'

'Not yet. But yes, one day, you will do that. Without regrets.'

Monkrat set off to find another cask of kelyk.

Gradithan walked over to Salind. He crouched in front of her, leaned forward to lick the drool from her lips. 'We'll dance together,' he said. 'Are you eager for that?'

He saw the answer in her eyes.

High atop the tower, in the moment that Silanah stirred – cold eyes fixed upon the pilgrim encampment beyond the veil of Night – Anomander Rake had reached out to still her with the lightest of touches.

'Not this time, my love,' he said in a murmur. 'Soon. You will know.'

Slowly, the enormous dragon settled once more, eyes closing to the thinnest of slits.

The Son of Darkness let his hand remain, resting there on her cool, scaled neck. 'Do not fear,' he said, 'I will not restrain you next time.'

He sensed the departure of Spinnock Durav, on a small fast cutter into the Ortnal beyond Nightwater. Perhaps the journey would serve him well, a distance ever stretching between the warrior and what haunted him.

And he sensed, too, the approach of Endest Silann down along the banks of the river, his oldest friend, who had one more task ahead of him. A most difficult one.

But these were difficult times, he reflected.

Anomander Rake left Silanah then, beneath Darkness that never broke.

North and west of Bastion, Kallor walked an empty road.

He had found nothing worthwhile in Bastion. The pathetic remnant of one of Nightchill's lovers, a reminder of curses voiced long ago, a reminder of how time twisted everything, like a rope binding into ever tighter knots and kinks. Until what should have been straight was now a tangled, useless mess.

Ahead awaited a throne, a new throne, one that he deserved. He believed it was taking shape, becoming something truly corporeal. Raw power, brimming with unfulfilled promise.

But the emergence of the throne was not the only thing awaiting him, and he sensed well that much at least. A convergence, yes, yet another of those confounded cusps, when powers drew together, when unforeseen paths suddenly intersected. When all of existence could change in a single moment, in the solitary cut of a sword, in a word spoken or a word left unspoken.

What would come?

He needed to be there. In its midst. Such things were what kept him going, after all. Such things were what made life worth living.

*I am the High King of Failures, am I not? Who else deserves the Broken Throne? Who else personifies the misery of the Crippled God? No, it will be mine, and as for all the rest, well, we'll see, won't we?*

He walked on, alone once more. Satisfying, to be reminded – as he had been when travelling in the company of those pathetic Tiste Andii – that the world was crowded with idiots. Brainless, stumbling, clumsy with stupid certainties and convictions.

Perhaps, this time, he would dispense with empires. This time, yes, he would crush everything, until every wretched mortal scrabbled in the dirt, fighting over grubs and roots. Was that not the perfect realm for a broken throne?

*Yes, and what better proof of my right to claim that throne? Kallor alone turns his back on civilization. Look on, Fallen One, and see me standing before you. Me and none other.*

*I vow to take it all down. Every brick. And the world can look on, awed, in wonder. The gods themselves will stare, dumbfounded, amazed, bereft and lost. Curse me to fall each and every time, will you? But I will make a place where no fall is possible. I will defeat that curse, finally defeat it.*

*Can you hear me, K'rul?*

*No matter. You will see what there is to see, soon enough.*

These were, he decided, glorious times indeed.

# BOOK THREE

# TO DIE IN THE NOW

Push it on to the next moment
Don't think now, save it
For later when thinking will show
Its useless face
When it's too late and worry is wasted
In the rush for cover

Push it past into that pocket
So that it relents its gnawing presence
And nothing is worth doing
In pointless grace
When all the valid suppositions
Smother your cries

Push it over into the deep hole
You don't want to know
In case it breaks and makes you feel
Cruel reminders
When all you could have done is now past
No don't bother

Push it well into the corner
It's no use, so spare me the grief
You didn't like the cost so bright, so high
The bloodiest cut
When all you sought was sweet pleasure
To the end of your days

Push it on until it pushes back
Shout your shock, shout it
You never imagined you never knew what
Turning away would do
Now wail out your dread in waves of disbelief
It's done it's dead

Push your way to the front
Clawing the eyes of screaming kin

No legacy awaits your shining children
It's killed, killed
Gone the future all to feed some holy glory
The world is over. Over.

*Siban's Dying Confession*
Siban of Aren

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We watched him approach from a league away
Staggering beneath the weight of all he held
In his arms
We thought he wore a crown but when he came near
The circlet was revealed as the skin of a serpent
Biting its tail
We laughed and shared the carafe when he fell
Cheering as he climbed back upright
In pleasing charm
We slowed into silence when he arrived
And saw for ourselves the burden he carried
Kept from harm
We held stern in the face of his relieved smile
And he said this fresh young world he had found
Was now ours
We looked on as if we were grand gods
Contemplating a host of undeserved gifts
Drawing knives
Bold with pride we cut free bloodied slices
Shared out this bright dripping bounty
And ate our fill
We saw him weep then when nothing was left
Backing away with eyes of pain and dismay
Arms falling
But wolves will make of any world a carcass
We simply replied with our natures revealed
In all innocence
We proclaimed with zeal our humble purity
Though now he turned away and did not hear
As the taste soured

And the betrayal of poison crept into our limbs
We watched him walk away now a league maybe more
His lonely march
His mourning departure from our kindness
His happy annihilation of our mindless selves
Snake-bit unto death

*The Last Days of Our Inheritance*
Fisher kel Tath

The vast springs of the carriage slammed down to absorb the thundering impact; then, as the enormous conveyance surged back up, Gruntle caught a momentary glimpse of one of the Bole brothers, his grip torn loose, wheeling through the grainy air. Arms scything, legs kicking, face wide with bemused surprise.

His tether snapped taut, and Gruntle saw that the idiot had tied it to one of his ankles. The man plunged down and out of sight.

The horses were screaming, manes whipping in their frantic heaves forward across stony, broken ground. Shadowy figures voiced muted cries as the beasts trampled them under hoof, and the carriage rocked sickeningly over bodies.

Someone was shrieking in his ear, and Gruntle twisted round on his perch on the carriage roof, to see the other Bole brother – Jula – tugging on the tether. A foot appeared – moccasin gone, long knobby toes splayed wide as if seeking a branch – and then the shin and lumpy knee. A moment later Amby reached up, found a handhold, and pulled himself back on to the roof. Wearing the strangest grin Gruntle had ever seen.

In the half-light the Trygalle carriage raced onward, plunging through seething masses of people. Even as they carved through like a ship cutting crazed seas, ragged, rotting arms reached up to the sides. Some caught hold only to have their arms torn from their sockets. Others were pulled off their feet, and these ones started climbing, seeking better purchase.

Upon which the primary function of the shareholders was made apparent. Sweetest Sufferance, the short, plump woman with the bright smile, was now snarling, wailing with a hatchet into an outreaching arm. Bones snapped like sticks and she shouted as she kicked into a leering desiccated face, hard enough to punch the head from the shoulders.

Damned corpses – they were riding through a sea of animated corpses, and it seemed that virtually every one of them wanted to book passage.

A large brutish shape reared up beside Gruntle. Barghast, hairy as an ape, filed blackened teeth revealed in a delighted grin.

Releasing one hand from the brass rung, Gruntle tugged loose one of his cutlasses, slashed the heavy blade into the corpse's face. It reeled away, the bottom half of the grin suddenly gone. Twisting further round, Gruntle kicked the Barghast in the chest. The apparition fell back. A moment later someone else appeared, narrow-shouldered, the top of its head an elongated pate with a nest of mousy hair perched on the crown, a wizened face beneath it.

Gruntle kicked again.

The carriage pitched wildly as the huge wheels rolled over something big. Gruntle felt himself swinging out over the roof edge and he shouted in pain as his hand was wrenched where it gripped a rung. Clawed fingers scrabbled against his thighs and he kicked in growing panic. His heel struck something that didn't yield and he used that purchase to launch himself back on to the roof.

On the opposite side, three dead men were now mauling Sweetest Sufferance, each one seemingly intent on some kind of rape. She twisted and writhed beneath them, chopping with her hatchets, biting at their withered hands and head-butting the ones that tried for a kiss. Reccanto Ilk then joined the fray, using a strange saw-toothed knife as he attacked various joints – shoulders, knees, elbows – and tossing the severed limbs over the side as he went.

Gruntle lifted himself on to his knees and glared out across the landscape. The masses of dead, he realized, were all moving in one direction, whilst the carriage cut obliquely into their path – and as the resistance before them built, figures converging like blood to a wound, forward momentum began inexorably to slow, the horses stamping high as they clambered over ever more undead.

Someone was shouting near the rear of the carriage, and Gruntle turned to see the woman named Faint leaning down over the side, yelling through the shuttered window.

Another heavy blow buffeted the carriage, and something demonic roared. Claws tore free a chunk of wood.

*'Get us out of here!'*

Gruntle could not agree more, as the demon suddenly loomed into view, reptilian arms reaching for him.

Snarling, he leapt to his feet, both weapons now in hand.

An elongated, fanged face lunged at him, hissing.

Gruntle roared back – a deafening sound – cutlasses lashing out. Edges slammed into thick hide, sliced deep into lifeless flesh, down to the bones of the demon's long neck.

He saw something like surprise flicker in the creature's pitted eyes, and then the head and half of the neck fell away.

Two more savage chops sent its forearms spinning.

The body plunged back, and even as it did so smaller corpses were scrambling on to it, as if climbing a ladder.

He now heard a strange sound ahead, rhythmic, like the clashing of weapons against shield rims. But the sound was too loud for that, too overwhelming, unless – Gruntle straightened and faced forward.

An army indeed. Dead soldiers, moving in ranks, in squares and wedges, marching along with all the rest – and in numbers unimaginable. He stared, struggling to comprehend the vastness of the force. As far as he could see before them . . . *Gods below, all of the dead, on the march – but where? To what war?*

The scene suddenly blurred, dispersed in fragments. The carriage seemed to slump under him. Darkness swept in, a smell of the sea, the thrash of waves, sand sliding beneath the wheels. The carriage side nearest him lurched into the bole of a palm tree, sending down a rain of cusser-sized nuts that pounded along the roof before bounding away. The horses stumbled, slowing their wild plunge, and a moment later everything came to a sinking halt.

Looking up Gruntle saw stars in a gentle night sky.

Beneath him the carriage door creaked open, and someone clambered out to vomit on to the sands, coughing and spitting and cursing.

Master Quell.

Gruntle climbed down, using the spokes of the nearest wheel, and, his legs feeling shaky under him, made his way to the sorceror.

The man was still on his hands and knees, hacking out the last dregs of whatever had been in his stomach. 'Oh,' he gasped. 'My aching head.'

Faint came up alongside Gruntle. She'd been wearing an iron skullcap but she'd lost it, and now her hair hung in matted strands, framing her round face. 'I thought a damned tiger had landed on us,' she said, 'but it was you, putting the terror into a demon. So it's true, those tattoos aren't tattoos at all.'

Glanno Tarp had dropped down, dodging to avoid the snapping teeth of the nearest horses. 'Did you see Amby Bole go flying? Gods, that was stupacular!'

Gruntle frowned. 'Stu – what?'

'Stupidly spectacular,' explained Faint. 'Or spectacularly stupid. Are you Soletaken?'

He glanced at her, then set off to explore.

A task quickly accomplished. They were on an island. A very small island, less than fifty paces across. The sand was crushed coral, gleaming silver in the starlight. Two palm trees rose from the centre. In the surrounding shallows, a thousand paces out, ribbons of reef ran entirely round the atoll, breaking the surface like the spine of a sea serpent. More islands were visible, few bigger than the one they were on, stretching out like the beads of a broken necklace, the nearest one perhaps three thousand paces distant.

As he returned he saw a corpse plummeting down from the carriage roof to thump in the sand. After a moment it sat up. 'Oh,' it said.

The Trell emerged from the carriage, followed by the swamp witch, Precious Thimble, who looked ghostly pale as she stumbled a few steps,

then promptly sat down on the sand. Seeing Gruntle, Mappo walked over.

'I gather,' he said, 'we encountered something unexpected in Hood's realm.'

'I wouldn't know,' Gruntle replied. 'It was my first visit.'

'Unexpected?' Faint snorted. 'That was insane – all the dead in existence, on the march.'

'Where to?' Gruntle asked.

'Maybe not to, maybe *from.'*

From? In retreat? Now that was an alarming notion. *If the dead are on the run . . .*

'Used to be,' Faint mused, 'the realm of the dead was an easy ride. Peaceful. But in the last few years . . . something's going on.' She walked over to Master Quell. 'So, if that's not going to work, Quell, what now?'

The man, still on his hands and knees, looked up. 'You just don't get it, do you?'

'What?'

'We didn't even reach the damned *gate.'*

'But, then, what—' *'There wasn't any gate!'* the mage shrieked.

A long silence followed.

Nearby, the undead man was collecting seashells.

Jula Bole's watery eyes fixed on Precious Thimble, dreamy with adoration. Seeing this, Amby did the same, trying to make his expression even more desirous, so that when she finally looked over she would see that he was the right one for her, the only one for her. As the moments stretched, the competition grew fierce.

His left leg still ached, from the hip right down to his toes, and he had only one moccasin, but at least the sand was warm so that wasn't too bad.

Precious Thimble was in a meeting with Master Quell and that scary barbed man, and the hairy giant ogre named Mappo. These were the important people, he decided, and excepting Precious Thimble he wanted nothing to do with them. Standing too close to those folk was never healthy. Heads explode, hearts burst – he'd seen it with his own eyes, back when he was a runt (but not nearly as much of a runt as Jula) and the family had decided at last to fight the Malazans who were showing up in their swamp like poison mushrooms. Buna Bole had been running things back then, before he got eaten by a toad, but it was a fact that Buna's next-to-closest brothers – the ones who wanted to get closer – all went and got themselves killed. Exploding heads. Bursting hearts. Boiling livers. It was the law of dodging, of course. Marshals and their sub-marshals were smart and smart meant fast, so when the arrows and quarrels and waves of magic flew, why, they dodged out of the way. Anybody round them, trying to be as smart but not smart at all and so just that much slower, well, they didn't dodge quick enough.

Jula finally sighed, announcing his defeat, and looked over at Amby. 'I can't believe I saved you.'

'I can't neither. I wouldn't of.'

'That's why I can't believe that's what I did. But then she's seen how brave I am, how generous and selfless. She's seen I'm better because she knows you wouldn't have done it.'

'Maybe I would've, and maybe she knows that, Jula. Besides, one of them sick smelly ones was trying to open the doors, and if it wasn't for me he'd of got in – and that's what she really saw.'

'You didn't scrape that one off on purpose.'

'How do you know?'

'Because you butted him with your face, Amby.'

Amby tested his nose again and winced, and then he sneered. 'She saw what she saw, and what she saw wasn't *you.'*

'She saw my hands, reaching down to drag you back up. She saw that.'

'She didn't. I made sure by covering them with, er, with my shirt.'

'You lie.'

'*You* lie.'

'No, you.'

'You!'

'You can say what you like, Amby, whatever you like. It was me saving you.'

'Pulling off my moccasin, you mean.'

'That was an accident.'

'Yeah, then where is it?'

'Fell off the side.'

'No it didn't. I checked your bag, Jula. You wasn't trying to save me at all, you was stealing my moccasin because it's your favourite moccasin. I want it back.'

'It's against the law to look in someone else's bag.'

'Swamp law. Does this look like a swamp?'

'That doesn't matter. You broke the law. Anyway, what you found was my spare moccasin.'

'Your one spare moccasin?'

'That's right.'

'Then why was it full of my love notes?'

'What love notes?'

'The ones me and her been writing back and forth. The ones I hid in my moccasin. Those ones, Jula.'

'What's obvious now is just how many times you been breaking the law. Because you been hiding your love notes – which you write to yourself and

nobody else – you been hiding them in my spare moccasin!'

'Not that you'd ever look.'

'But I might, if I knew about it.'

'You didn't though, did you? Besides, you don't have a spare moccasin, because I stole it.'

'And that's why I stole it back!'

'You can't steal back what you didn't know was stolen in the first place. That's just stealing. And stealing's against the law.'

'Swamp law.'

'Your bag *is* a swamp.'

'Hahahahaha—'

And Amby grinned at his own joke, and then he too laughed. 'Hahahahaha—'

Faint tugged the stopper free and took a swig, then handed the skin to Sweetest Sufferance. 'Listen to those idiots,' she said.

'I don't want to,' Sweetest Sufferance replied. And then she shivered. 'That was the first time, you know, them trying to get in my trousers like that.'

'Cursed with rigor mortis, maybe.'

She snorted. 'You kidding me? Whatever they had down there wasn't even real, like maybe sticks tied on or something.' She drank down some wine, then sighed and looked round. 'Pretty.'

'Our tiny piece of paradise.'

'We can watch the sun come up, at least. That will be nice.' She was quiet for a moment, before resuming, 'When Reccanto showed up, I thought he was helping. But now I think he was just using the situation to get a few handfuls of his own.'

'Are you surprised, Sweetie? He's a man.'

'With bad eyes.'

'Bad eyes and bad hands.'

'I might have to murder him.'

'Hold on,' said Faint, taking the skin back. 'He *did* save you, cutting off arms and hands—'

'Eliminating the competition.'

'Defending your honour, Sweetie.'

'If you say so.'

Faint replaced the stopper. 'Gods below, Sweetie, what do you think we ran into back there?'

Sweetest Sufferance pursed her plump lips, long-lashed lids settling down over her eyes. 'Back in One Eye Cat, when I was a child, I was taken to a Dawn of Flies – you know, those ceremonies from the Temple of Hood, when all the priests paint themselves in honey—'

'In some places,' cut in Faint, 'they use blood.'

'So I've heard. In One Eye Cat, it was honey, so that the flies stuck. Flies and wasps, actually. Anyway, I was with my grandfather, who'd been a soldier in the Revenants—'

'Gods, it's been a long time since I last heard them mentioned!' Faint stared across at Sweetest Sufferance. 'Is this true? Your grandfather was with the Revenants?'

'So he always told it. When I was very young, I believed every word he said. When I was older, I didn't believe any of it. And now I'm still older, I've gone back to believing him. Things in his house, the carved flagstones, the broken masks he had on the wall . . . yes, Faint, I believe he was at that.'

'Commanded by a Seguleh—'

'An outlawed Seguleh, yes. Anyway, it was my grandfather who took me to watch his old company's patron temple and all the priests and priestesses

doing their flies thing.'

'Wait. The Revenants were supposed to have all disappeared – taken by Hood himself, to serve him in the realm of the dead. So what was your grandfather doing living in One Eye Cat?'

'He lost his sword arm in a battle. He'd been left for dead, and by the time anyone found him it was too late for any serious healing. So they seared the stump and retired him out. Now, you going to let me tell my tale or not?'

'Yes, fine. Sorry.'

'He said the priests were getting it all wrong, with that honey. The flies and wasps weren't the important thing in the ceremony. It was the blood – honey, but that symbolized blood. The Revenants – who were as good as Hood's own warrior-priests, in the mortal world anyway – well, they were flagellants. Blood on the skin, life bled out to die on the skin – that was the important detail. It's why Hood cherishes dead soldiers more than any other of the countless dead that stumble through the gate. The Merchants of Blood, the army that will fight on the hidden plain called Defiance Last.' She paused, then licked her lips. 'That's what the Dawn of Flies is about. A final battle, the dead gathered, on a hidden plain called Defiance Last.'

'So,' said Faint, feeling chilled by Sweetest Sufferance's story, 'maybe that's why Hood took the Revenants. Because that battle is coming.'

'Give me some more of that,' Sweetest Sufferance said, reaching for the wineskin.

Glanno Tarp nudged Reccanto Ilk. 'See 'em? They're talking about us. Well, me, mostly. It's gonna happen, Ilk, sooner or later, it's gonna happen.'

Reccanto Ilk squinted across at the man. 'What, they gonna kill you in your sleep?'

'Don't be an idiot. One a them's gonna ask me to forevermarry her.'

'And *then* she'll kill you in your sleep. And then we can all slice up your share.'

'You think I didn't see how you gropered Sweetie?'

'How could you? You was driving!'

'There ain't nothing that I don't see, Ilk. That's what makes me such a goodiferous driver.'

'She's got the nicest handholds.'

'Watch what you're doing with my future foreverwife.'

'Could be Faint you end up with, which means I can do what I like with Sweetie.'

Glanno Tarp loosed a loud belch. 'We should make up something to eat. Breakfast, so when they're finished jawbering over there we can up and get on our way.'

'Wherever that is.'

'Wherever don't matter. Never has and never will.'

Reccanto Ilk grinned. 'Right. It ain't the destination that counts . . .'

And together they added, 'It's the journey!'

Faint and Sweetest Sufferance looked over, both scowling. 'Not that again!' Faint called. 'Just stop it, you two! Stop it or we'll kill you in your sleep!'

Reccanto Ilk nudged Glanno Tarp.

Mappo crouched, rocking on the balls of his broad feet, waiting for Master Quell to finish his muttered incantation against pain. He sympathized, since it was clear that the mage was suffering, his face pale and drawn, forehead slick with sweat, his hands trembling.

That anyone would choose such a profession, given the terrible cost, was a difficult notion to accept. Was coin worth this? He could not understand that sort of thinking.

What held real value in this world? In any world? Friendship, the gifts of love and compassion. The honour one accorded the life of another person. None of this could be bought with wealth. It seemed to him such a simple

truth. Yet he knew that its very banality was fuel for sneering cynicism and mockery. Until such things were taken away, until the price of their loss came to be personal, in some terrible, devastating arrival into one's life. Only at that moment of profound extremity did the contempt wash down from that truth, revealing it bare, undeniable.

All the truths that mattered were banal.

Yet here was another truth. He had paid for this journey. His coin bought this man's pain. The exchange was imbalanced, and so Mappo grieved for Master Quell, and would not shy away from his own guilt. Honour meant, after all, a preparedness, a willingness to weigh and measure, to judge rightful balance with no hand tilting the scales.

And so, they all here were paying to serve Mappo's need, this journey through warrens. Another burden he must accept. If he could.

The formidable warrior sitting beside him stirred then and said, 'I think I see now why the Trygalle loses so many shareholders, Master Quell. By the Abyss, there must be warrens where one can journey through in peace?'

Master Quell rubbed at his face. 'Realms resist, Gruntle. We are like a splash of water in hot oil. It's all I can do to not . . . bounce us off. Mages can push themselves into their chosen warrens – it's not easy, it's a game of subtle persuasion most of the time. Or a modest assertion of will. You don't want to blast a hole from one realm to the next, because that's likely to go out of control. It can devour a mage in an instant.' He looked up at them with bloodshot eyes. 'We can't do it that way.' He waved a weak hand at the carriage behind him. 'We arrive like an insult. We *are* an insult. Like a white-hot spear point, we punch through, race along our wild path, and all that we leave in our wake I need to make sure is, er, cauterized. Seared shut. Failing that, a rush of power explodes behind us, and that's a wave no mortal can ride for long.'

Precious Thimble spoke from behind Mappo. 'You must be High Mages, then, one and all.'

To her observation, Master Quell nodded. 'I admit, it's starting to trouble me, this way of travel. I think we're scarring the whole damned universe.

We're making existence . . . bleed. Oh, just a seep here and there, amidst whatever throbs of pain reality might possess. In any case, that's why there's no peaceful path, Gruntle. Denizens in every realm are driven to annihilate us.'

'You said we did not even reach Hood's Gate,' the barbed man said after a moment. 'And yet . . .'

'Aye.' He spat on to the sand. 'The dead sleep no more. What a damned mess.'

'Find us the nearest land in our own world,' said Mappo. 'I will walk from there. Make my own way—' 'We stay true to the contract, Trell. We'll deliver you where you want to go—' 'Not at the price of you and your companions possibly dying – I cannot accept that, Master Quell.'

'We don't do refunds.'

'I do not ask for one.'

Master Quell rose shakily. 'We'll see after our next leg. For now, it's time for breakfast. There's nothing worse than heaving when there's nothing in the gut to heave.'

Gruntle also straightened. 'You have decided on a new path?'

Quell grimaced. 'Look around, Gruntle. It's been decided for us.'

Mappo rose and remained at Gruntle's side as Quell staggered to his crew, who were gathered round a brazier they had dragged out from the belly of the carriage. The Trell squinted at the modest plot of land. 'What did he mean?' he asked.

Gruntle shrugged. When he smiled at Mappo his fangs gleamed. 'Since I have to guess, Trell, I'd say we're going for a swim.'

And Precious Thimble snorted. 'Mael's realm. And you two thought Hood was bad.'

When she was four years old, Precious Thimble was given a breathing tube and buried in peat, where she remained for two days and one night. She

probably died. Most of them did, but the soul remained in the dead body, trapped by the peat and its dark, sorcerous qualities. This was how the old witches explained things. A child must be given into the peat, into that unholy union of earth and water, and the soul must be broken free of the flesh it dwelt within, for only then could that soul travel, only then could that soul wander free in the realm of dreams.

She had few memories of that time in the peat. Perhaps she screamed, sought to thrash in panic. The ropes that bound her, that would be used to pull her free at dusk of the second day, had left deep burns on her wrists and her neck, and these burns had not come from the gentle, measured pressure when the witches had drawn her back into the world. It was also whispered that sometimes the spirits that lurked in the peat sought to steal the child's body, to make it a place of their own. And the witches who sat guarding the temporary grave told of times when the rope – its ends wrapped about their wrists – suddenly grew taut, and a battle would then begin, between the witches of the surface and the spirits of the deep. Sometimes, it was admitted, the witches lost, the ropes were gnawed unto breaking, and the child was pulled into the foul deep, emerging only once every year, on the Night of the Awakened. Children with blue-brown skin and hollowed-out eye sockets, with hair the colour of rust or blood, with long polished nails – walking the swamp and singing songs of the earth that could drive a mortal mad.

Had spirits come for her? The witches would not say. Were the burns on her skin the result of panic, or something else? She did not know.

Her memories of that time were few and visceral. The weight on her chest. The seeping cold. The taste of fetid water in her mouth, the stinging in her squeezed-shut eyes. And the sounds she could hear, terrible trickling sounds, like the rush of fluids in the veins of the earth. The thumps and crunches, the crackling approach of . . . things.

It was said there was no air in the peat. That not even her skin could breathe – and such breathing was necessary to all life. And so she must have died in truth.

Since then, at night when she slept, she could rise from her flesh, could hover, invisible, above her motionless body. And look down in admiration. She was beautiful indeed, as if something of the child she had been never aged, was immune to growing old. A quality that made men desperate to claim her, not as an equal, alas, but as a possession. And the older the man the greater the need.

When she had made this discovery, about herself and about the men who most desired her, she was disgusted. Why give this gorgeous body to such wrinkled, pathetic creatures? She would not. Ever. Yet she found it difficult to defend herself against such needy hunters of youth – oh, she could curse them into misery, she could poison them and see them die in great pain, but such things only led her to pity, the soft kind not the nasty kind, which made being cruel just that much harder.

She had found her solution in the two young Bole brothers. Barely out of their teens, neither one well suited to staying in the Mott Irregulars, for certain reasons over which she need not concern herself. And both of them gloriously in love with her.

It did not matter that they barely had a single brain between them. They were Boles, ferocious against mages and magic of any kind, and born with the salamander god's gift of survival. They protected her in all the battles one could imagine, from out-and-out fighting to the devious predations of old men.

When she was done admiring her own body, she would float over to where they slept and look down upon their slack faces, on the gaping mouths from which snores groaned out in wheezing cadence, the threads of drool and the twitching eyelids. Her pups. Her guard dogs. Her deadly hounds.

Yet now, on this night with the tropical stars peering down, Precious Thimble felt a growing unease. This Trygalle venture she'd decided on – this whim – was proving far deadlier than she had expected. In fact, she'd almost lost one of them in Hood's realm. And losing one of them would be . . . bad. It would free the other one to close in and that she didn't want, not at all. And one guard dog wasn't nearly as effective as two.

Maybe, just maybe, she'd gone too far this time.

Gruntle opened his eyes, and watched as the faintly glowing emanation floated over to hover above the sleeping forms of the Bole brothers, where it lingered for a time before returning to sink back down into the form of Precious Thimble.

From nearby he heard the Trell's soft grunt, and then, 'What game does she play at, I wonder . . .'

Gruntle thought to reply. Instead, sleep took him suddenly, pouncing, tumbling his mind away and down, spitting him out like a mangled rat into a damp glade of high grass. The sun blazed down like a god's enraged eye. Feeling battered, misused, he rose on to all fours – a position that did not feel at all awkward, or strike him as unusual.

Solid jungle surrounded the clearing, from which came the sounds of countless birds, monkeys and insects – a cacophony so loud and insistent that a growl of irritation rose from deep in his throat.

All at once the nearest sounds ceased, a cocoon of silence broken only by the hum of bees and a pair of long-tailed hummingbirds dancing in front of an orchid – sprites that then raced off in a beating whirr of wings.

Gruntle felt his hackles rise, stiff and prickling on the back of his neck – too fierce for a human – and looking down he saw the sleek banded forelimbs of a tiger where his arms and hands should have been.

*Another one of these damned dreams. Listen, Trake, if you want me to be just like you, stop playing these scenes for me. I'll be a tiger if that's what you want – just don't confine it to my dreams. I wake up feeling clumsy and slow and I don't like it. I wake up remembering nothing but freedom.*

Something was approaching. *Things . . . three, no, five. Not big, not dangerous.* He slowly swung his head round, narrowing his gaze.

The creatures that came to the edge of the clearing were somewhere between apes and humans. Small as adolescents, lithe and sleek, with fine fur thickening at the armpits and crotch. The two males carried short curved batons of some sort, fire-hardened, with inset fangs from some large

carnivore. The females wielded spears, one of them holding her spear in one hand and a broad flint axe head in the other, which she tossed into the clearing. The object landed with a thump, flattening the grasses, halfway between Gruntle and the band.

Gruntle realized, with a faint shock, that he knew the taste of these creatures – their hot flesh, their blood, the saltiness of their sweat. In this form, in this place and in this time, he had hunted them, had pulled them down, hearing their piteous cries as his jaws closed fatally round their necks.

This time, however, he was not hungry, and it seemed they knew it.

Awe flickered in their eyes, their mouths twisting into strange expressions, and all at once one of the women was speaking. The language trilled, punctuated by clicks and glottal stops.

And Gruntle understood her.

*'Beast of darkness and fire, hunter in dark and light, fur of night and motion in grasses, god who takes, see this our gift and spare us for we are weak and few and this land is not ours, this land is the journey for we dream of the shore, where food is plenty and the birds cry in the heat of the sun.'*

Gruntle found himself sliding forward, silent as a thought, and he was life and power bound in a single breath. Forward, until the axe blade was at his taloned paws. Head lowering, nostrils flaring as he inhaled the scent of stone and sweat, the edges where old blood remained, where grasses had polished the flint, the urine that had been splashed upon it.

These creatures wanted to claim this glade for their own.

They were begging permission, and maybe something more. Something like . . . *protection. 'The leopard tracks us and challenges you*,' the woman sang, *'but she will not cross your path. She will flee your scent for you are the master here, the god, the unchallenged hunter of the forest. Last night, she took my child – we have lost all our children. Perhaps we will be the*

*last. Perhaps we will never find the shore again. But if our flesh must feed the hungry, then let it be you who grows strong with our blood.*

*'Tonight, if you come to take one of us, take me. I am the eldest. I bear no more children. I am useless*.' She hunched down then, discarding her spear, and sank into the grasses, where she rolled on to her back, exposing her throat.

They were mad, Gruntle decided. Driven insane by the terrors of the jungle, where they were strangers, lost, seeking some distant coastline. And as they journeyed, every night delivered horror.

But this was a dream. From some ancient time. And even if he sought to guide them to the shore, he would awaken long before that journey was completed. Awaken, and so abandon them to their fates. And what if he grew hungry in this next moment? What if his instinct exploded within him, launching him at this hapless female, closing his jaws on her throat?

Was this where the notion of human sacrifice came from? When nature eyed them avid with hunger? When they had naught but sharpened sticks and a smouldering fire to protect them?

He would not kill them this night.

He would find something else to kill. Gruntle set off, into the jungle. A thousand scents filled him, a thousand muted noises whispered in the deep shadows. He carried his massive weight effortlessly, silent as he padded forward. Beneath the canopy the world was dusk and so it would ever remain, yet he saw everything, the flit of a green-winged mantis, the scuttle of woodlice in the humus, the gliding escape of a millipede. He slipped across the path of deer, saw where they had fed on dark-leaved shoots. He passed a rotted log that had been torn apart and pushed aside, the ground beneath ravaged by the questing snouts of boar.

Some time later, with night descending, he found the spoor he had been seeking. Acrid, pungent, both familiar and strange. It was sporadic, proof that the creature that left it was cautious, taking to the trees in its moments of rest.

A female.

He slowed his pace as he tracked the beast. All light was gone now, every colour shifted into hues of grey. If she discovered him she would flee. But then, the only beast that wouldn't was the elephant, and he had no interest in hunting that wise leviathan with its foul sense of humour.

Edging forward, one soft step at a time, he came upon the place where she had made a kill. A wapiti, its panic a bitter breath in the air. The humus scuffed by its tiny hoofs, a smear of blood on curled black leaves. Halting, settling down, Gruntle lifted his gaze.

And found her. She had drawn her prey up on to a thick branch from which lianas depended in a cascade of night blossoms. The wapiti – or what remained of it – was draped across the bole, and she was lying along the branch's length, lambent eyes fixed upon Gruntle.

This leopard was well suited to hunting at night – her coat was black on black, the spots barely discernible.

She regarded him without fear, and this gave Gruntle pause.

A voice then murmured in his skull, sweet and dark. *'Go on your way, Lord. There is not enough to share . . . even if I so desired, which of course I do not.'*

*'I have come for you*,' Gruntle replied.

Her eyes widened and he saw muscles coiling along her shoulders. *'Do all beasts know riders, then?'*

For a moment Gruntle did not comprehend her question, and then understanding arrived with sudden heat, sudden interest. *'Has your soul travelled far, my lady?'*

*'Through time. Through unknown distances. This is where my dreams take me every night. Ever hunting, ever tasting blood, ever shying from the path of the likes of you, Lord.'*

*'I am summoned by prayer*,' Gruntle said, knowing even as he said it that it was the truth, that the half-human creatures he had left behind did indeed

call upon him, as if to invite the killer answered some innate refusal of random chance. He was summoned to kill, he realized, to give proof to the notion of fate.

*'Curious idea, Lord.'*

*'Spare them, Lady.'*

*'Who?'*

*'You know of whom I speak. In this time, there is but one creature that can voice prayers.'*

He sensed wry amusement. *'You are wrong in that. Although the others have no interest in imagining beasts as gods and goddesses.'*

*'Others?'*

*'Many nights away from this place, there are mountains, and in them can be found fastnesses where dwell the K'Chain Che'Malle. There is a vast river that runs to a warm ocean, and on its banks can be found the pit-cities of the Forkrul Assail. There are solitary towers where lone Jaghut live, waiting to die. There are the villages of the Tartheno Toblakai and their tundradwelling cousins, the Neph Trell.'*

*'You know this world far better than I do, Lady.'*

*'Do you still intend to kill me?'*

*'Will you cease hunting the half-humans?'*

*'As you like, but you must know, there are times when this beast has no rider. There are times too, I suspect, when the beast you now ride also hunts alone.'*

*'I understand.'*

She rose from her languid perch, and made her way down the trunk of the tree head first, landing lightly on the soft forest floor. *'Why are they so important to you?'*

*'I do not know. Perhaps I pity them.'*

*'For our kind, Lord, there is no room for pity.'*

*'I disagree. It is what we can give when we ride the souls of these beasts. Hood knows, it's all we can give.'*

*'Hood?'*

*'The God of Death.'*

*'You come from a strange world, I think.'*

Now this was startling. Gruntle was silent for a long moment, and then he asked, *'Where are you from, Lady?'*

*'A city called New Morn.'*

*'I know of a ruin named Morn.'*

*'My city is no ruin.'*

*'Perhaps you exist in a time before the coming of Hood.'*

*'Perhaps*.' She stretched, the glow of her eyes thinning to slits. *'I am leaving soon, Lord. If you are here when I do, the beast that remains will not take kindly to your presence.'*

*'Oh? And would she be so foolish as to attack me?'*

*'And die? No. But I would not curse her with terror.'*

*'Ah, is that pity, then?'*

*'No, it is love.'*

Yes, he could see how one could come to love such magnificent animals, and find the riding of their souls a most precious gift. *'I will go now, Lady. Do you think we will meet again?'*

*'It does seem we share the night, Lord.'*

She slipped away, and even Gruntle's extraordinary vision failed him from tracking her beyond a few strides. He swung about and padded off in the opposite direction. Yes, he could feel his own grip here weakening, and

soon he would return to his own world. That pallid, stale existence, where he lived as if half blind, half deaf, deadened and clumsy.

He allowed himself a deep cough of anger, silencing the unseen denizens on all sides.

Until some brave monkey, high overhead, flung a stick at him. The thump as it struck the ground near his left hind leg made him start and shy away.

From the darkness overhead he heard chittering laughter.

The storm of chaos cavorted into his vision, consuming half the sky with a swirling madness of lead, grainy black and blazing tendrils of argent. He could see the gust front tearing the ground up in a frenzied wall of dust, rocks and dirt, growing ever closer.

Imminent oblivion did not seem so bad, as far as Ditch was concerned. He was being dragged by the chain shackled to his right ankle. Most of his skin had been scraped away – the white bone and cartilage of his remaining elbow, studded with grit, was visible within haloes of red. His knees were larger versions, and the shackle was slowly carving through his ankle and foot bones. He wondered what would happen when that foot was finally torn off – how it would feel. He'd lie there, motionless at last, perhaps watching that shackle tumble and twist and stutter away. He'd be . . . free.

The torment of this existence should not include pain. That was unfair. Of course, most of that pain was fading now – he was too far gone to curl and flinch, to gasp and sob – but the memories remained, like fire in his skull.

Pulled onward over loose stones, their sharp edges rolling up his back, gouging new furrows through the pulped meat, knuckling against the base of his skull to tear away the last few snarls of hair and scalp. And as the chain snagged, only to give and twist him round, he stared again and again upon that storm in their wake.

Songs of suffering from the groaning wagon somewhere ahead, an unending chorus of misery ever drifting back.

Too bad, he reflected, that the huge demon had not found him in the moments following his collapse, had not lifted him to its shoulder – not that

it could carry any more than it already had been carrying. But even if it had done little more than drag him to one side, then the edge of the wagon's massive wheel would not have crushed his right arm and shoulder, grinding both into pulp until threads of gristle were all that held it to his body. After that, all hopes – faint as they had been – of rising again to add his strength to the procession had vanished. He had become yet one more dead weight, dragged in the wake, adding to the suffering of those who trudged on.

Nearby, almost parallel to him, a huge chain sheathed in moss ended in the remnants of a dragon. Wings like tattered sails, spars snapped and dangling, the mostly skinless head dragged behind a shredded neck. When he had first seen it he had been shocked, horrified. Now, each time it came into view, he felt a wave of dread. That such a creature should have failed was proof of the desperate extremity now plaguing them.

Anomander Rake had stopped killing. The legion was failing. Annihilation edged ever closer.

*Life fears chaos. It was ever thus. We fear it more than anything else, because it is anathema. Order battles against dissolution. Order negotiates cooperation as a mechanism of survival, on every scale, from a patch of skin to an entire menagerie of interdependent creatures. That cooperation, of course, may not of essence be necessarily peaceful – a minute exchange of failures to ensure greater successes.*

*Yes, as I am dragged along here, at the very end of my existence, I begin to understand . . .*

*See me, see this gift of contemplation.*

*Rake, what have you done?*

A calloused hand closed about his remaining arm, lifted him clear of the ground, and he was being carried forward, closer to that crawling wagon.

'There is no point.'

'That,' replied a deep, measured voice, 'is without relevance.'

'I am not worth—'

'Probably not, but I intend to find you room on that wagon.'

Ditch hacked a ragged laugh. 'Just tear my foot off, good sir, and leave me.'

'No. There may be need for you, mage.'

Need? Now that was an absurd thing to say. 'Who are you?'

'Draconus.'

Ditch laughed a second time. 'I looked for you . . . seems centuries ago, now.'

'Now you have found me.'

'I thought you might know a way of escaping. Now, isn't that funny? After all, if you had, you would not still be here, would you?'

'That seems logical.'

An odd reply. 'Draconus.'

'What?'

'Are you a logical man?'

'Not in the least. Now, here we are.'

The sight that greeted Ditch as he was heaved round to face forward was, if anything, even more terrifying than anything else he had witnessed since arriving in the accursed realm of Dragnipur. A wall of bodies, projecting feet jammed amongst staring faces, the occasional arm hanging out, twitching, dripping sweat. Here a knee, there a shoulder. Tangles of sodden hair, fingers with dagger-long nails. Human, demon, Forkrul Assail, K'Chain Che'Malle, others of natures Ditch could not even identify. He saw one hand and forearm that appeared to be made entirely of metal, sockets and hinges and rods and a carapace of iron skin visible in mottled, pitted patches. Worst of all were the staring eyes, peering from faces that seemed to have surrendered every possible expression, leaving behind something slack and dull.

'Make space up top!' bellowed Draconus.

Cries of 'No room!' and 'Nowhere left!' greeted him.

Ignoring such protests, Draconus began climbing the wall of flesh. Faces twisted in rage and pain, eyes widened in affronted disbelief, hands clawed at him or beat him with fists, but the huge warrior was indifferent to all of it. Ditch could feel the man's enormous strength, an implacable certainty to every movement that bespoke something unconquerable. He was awed into silence.

Higher they climbed, and shadows raced in crazed patterns now in the churning glare of the storm, as if the natural gloom of the world clung close to its surface, and here, high above it, the air was clearer, sharper.

The rocking crawl of the wagon below was felt now in the swaying of the wall near the top, a motion groaned out in the slick shifting of flesh and in a wavering song of dull, rhythmic moans and grunts. The wall finally sloped inward, and Ditch was tugged over hummocks of skin, the bodies so tight-packed that the surface beneath him seemed solid, an undulating landscape, sheathed in sweat and flecks of ash and grime. Most of those lying here had settled on their stomachs, as if to stare at the sky – that would vanish for ever as soon as the next body arrived – was too much to bear.

Draconus rolled him into a depression between two backs, one facing one way, the other in the opposite direction. A man, a woman – the sudden contact with the woman's soft flesh as he was wedged against her startled an awakening in Ditch and he cursed.

'Take what you can, mage,' said Draconus.

Ditch heard him leaving.

He could make out distinct voices now, odd nearby sounds. Someone was scrabbling closer and Ditch felt a faint tug on his chain.

'Almost off, then. Almost off.'

Ditch twisted round to see who had spoken.

A Tiste Andii. He was clearly blind, and both sockets bore the terrible scarring of burns – only deliberate torture could be that precise. His legs were gone, stumps visible just below his hips. He was dragging himself up alongside Ditch, and the mage saw that the creature held in one hand a long sharpened bone with a blackened point.

'Plan on killing me?' Ditch asked.

The Tiste Andii paused, lifted his head. Straggly black hair framed a narrow, hollowed-out face. 'What sort of eyes do you have, friend?'

'Working ones.'

A momentary smile, and then he squirmed closer.

Ditch managed to shift round so that his ruined shoulder and arm were beneath him, freeing his undamaged arm. 'It's crazy, but I still intend to defend myself. Though death – if it even exists here – would be a mercy.'

'It doesn't,' replied the Tiste Andii. 'I could stab you for the next thousand years and do nothing more than leave you full of holes. Full of holes.' He paused and the smile flickered once more. 'Yet I must stab you anyway, since you've made a mess of things. A mess, a mess, a mess.'

'I have? Explain.'

'There's no point, unless you have eyes.'

'I have them, you damned fool!'

'But can they *see*?'

He caught the emphasis on the last word. Could he awaken magic here? Could he scrape something from his warren – enough to attenuate his vision? There was nothing to do but try. 'Wait a moment,' he said. Oh, the warren was there, yes, as impervious as a wall – yet he sensed something he had not expected. Cracks, fissures, things bleeding in, bleeding out.

The effects of chaos, he realized. *Gods, it's all breaking down!* Would there be a time, he wondered – an instant, in the very moment that the storm

finally struck them – when he would find his warren within reach? Could he escape before he was obliterated along with everyone and everything else?

'How long, how long, how long?' asked the Tiste Andii.

Ditch found he could indeed scrape a residue of power. A few words muttered under his breath, and all at once he saw what had been hidden before – he saw, yes, the flesh he was lying on.

A mass of tattoos blanketed every exposed patch of skin, lines and images crossing from one body to the next, yet nowhere could he see solid areas – all was made up of intricate, delicate traceries, patterns within patterns. He saw borders that dipped and twisted. He saw elongated figures with stretched faces and misshapen torsos. Not a single body atop this massive wagon had been exempted – barring Ditch's own.

The Tiste Andii must have heard his gasp, for he laughed. 'Imagine yourself hovering . . . oh, say fifteen man-heights overhead. Fifteen man-heights. Overhead, overhead. Hovering in the air, just beneath the ceiling of nothingness, the ceiling of nothingness. Looking down upon all this, all this, all this. Aye, it looks awry to you from where you crouch, but from up there, from up there, from up there – you will see no mounds of flesh, no knobs of skin-stretched bones – you'll see no shadows at all – only the scene. The scene, yes, laid flat you'd swear. You'd swear it to every god and goddess you can think of. Flat! Laid flat, laid flat!' Ditch struggled to comprehend what he was seeing – he did not dare attempt what the Tiste Andii had suggested, fearing the effort would drive him mad; no, he would not try to imagine himself plucked free of his flesh, his soul floating somewhere overhead. It was difficult enough to comprehend the obsession of this creation – a creation by a blind man. 'You've been up here for a long time,' Ditch finally said. 'Avoiding getting buried.'

'Yes and yes. I was among the first on the wagon. Among the first. Murdered by Draconus, because I sought to wrest Dragnipur from him – oh, Anomandaris Purake was not the first to try. I was. I was. I was. And if I had won the sword, why, my first victim would have been Anomandaris himself. Is that not a bitter joke, friend? It is, it is.'

'But this' – Ditch gestured with his one hand – 'it has to be a recent effort —'

'No, only the last layer, the last layer, the last layer.'

'What – what do you use for ink?'

'Clever question! From the wagon bloodwood, blackwood, the pitch and the pitch ever leaking out, ever sweating from the grain.'

'Could I hover high up, as you say,' asked Ditch, 'what scene would I see?'

'Wanderings, Holds, Houses, every god, every goddess, every spirit worth mentioning. Demon kings and demon queens. Dragons and Elders – oh, all there, all there. All there. Is this where you mean to stay, friend? Is this where you mean to stay?'

Ditch thought of this creature hunkered up against him, that bone needle pricking his skin. 'No. I plan on crawling round, as much as I can, never stopping. Leave me out of your scene.'

'You cannot do that! You will ruin everything!'

'Imagine me invisible, then. Imagine I don't even exist – I will stay out of your way.'

The sightless eyes were glistening and the Tiste Andii was shaking his head again and again.

'You will not have me,' Ditch said. 'Besides, it will all be ending soon.'

'Soon? How soon? How soon? How soon? How soon?'

'The storm looks to be no more than a league behind us.'

'If you will not join the scene,' the Tiste Andii said, 'I will push you off.'

'Draconus might not like that.'

'He will understand. He understands more than you, more than you, more and more and more than you!'

'Just let me rest,' said Ditch, 'for a while. I will then climb back down. I don't want to be up here when the end comes. I want to be standing. Facing the storm.'

'Do you really imagine the ritual will awaken all at once? Do you do you do you? The flower opens soon, but the night is long, and it will take that long, that long. For the flower to open. Open in the moment before dawn. Open in the moment. Draconus chose you – a mage – for the nexus. I need the nexus. You are the nexus. Lie there, be quiet, don't move.'

'No.'

'I cannot wait long, friend. Crawl about now if you like, but I cannot wait too long. A league away!'

'What is your name?' Ditch asked.

'What matter any of that?'

'For when I next speak to Draconus.'

'He knows me.'

'I don't.'

'I am Kadaspala, brother to Enesdia who was wife to Andarist.'

*Andarist. That's one name I recognize.* 'You wanted to murder the brother of your sister's husband?'

'I did. For what he did to them, what he did to them. For what he did to them!' Ditch stared at the anguish in the man's ravaged face. 'Who blinded you, Kadaspala?'

'It was a gift. A mercy. I did not comprehend the truth of that, not the real truth of it, the real truth. No. Besides, I thought my inner sight would be enough – to challenge Draconus. To steal Dragnipur. I was wrong, wrong. I was wrong. The truth is a gift, a mercy.'

'Who blinded you?'

The Tiste Andii flinched, then seemed to curl into himself. Tears glistened in the pits of his sockets. 'I blinded myself,' Kadaspala whispered. 'When I saw what he'd done. What he'd done. To his brother. To my sister. To my sister.'

Suddenly, Ditch did not want to ask any more questions of this man. He pushed himself from between the two bodies.

'I am going to . . . explore.'

'Come back, mage. Nexus. Come back. Come back.'

*We'll see.*

*

With all this time to reflect on things, Apsal'ara concluded that her biggest mistake was not in finding her way into Moon's Spawn. Nor in discovering the vaults and the heaps of magicked stones, ensorcelled weapons, armour, the blood-dipped idols and reliquaries from ten thousand extinct cults. No, her greatest error in judgement had been in trying to stab Anomander Rake in the back.

He'd been amused at finding her. He'd not spoken of executing her, or even chaining her in some deep crypt for all eternity. He'd simply asked her how she had managed to break in. Curiosity, more than a little wonder, perhaps even some admiration. And then she went and tried to kill him.

The damned sword had been out of its scabbard faster than an eye-blink, the deadly edge slicing across her belly even as she lunged with her obsidian dagger.

Such stupidity. But lessons only became lessons when one has reached the state of humility required to heed them. When one is past all the egotistical excuses and explanations flung up to fend off honest culpability. It was nature to attack first, abjuring all notions of guilt and shame. Lash out, white with rage, then strut away convinced of one's own righteousness.

She had long since left such imbecilic posturing behind. A journey of enlightenment, and it had begun with her last mortal breath, as she found

herself lying on the hard stone floor, looking up into the eyes of Anomander Rake, and seeing his dismay, his regret, his sorrow.

She could feel the growing heat of the storm, could feel its eternal hunger. Not long now, and then all her efforts would be for naught. The kinks of the chain finally showed some wear, but not enough, not nearly enough. She would be destroyed along with everyone else. She was not unique. She was, in fact, no different from every other idiot who'd tried to kill Rake, or Draconus.

The rain trickling down from the wagon bed was warmer than usual, foul with sweat, blood and worse. It streamed over her body. Her skin had been wet for so long it was coming away in ragged pieces, white with death, revealing raw red meat underneath. She was rotting.

The time was coming when she would have to drop down once more, emerge from under the wagon, and see for herself the arrival of oblivion. There would be no pity in its eyes – not that it had any – just the indifference that was the other face of the universe, the one all would have for ever turned away. The regard of chaos was the true source of terror – all the rest were but flavours, variations.

*I was a child once. I am certain of it. A child. I have a memory, one memory of that time. On a barren bank of a broad river. The sky was blue perfection. The caribou were crossing the river, in their tens and tens of thousands.*

*I remember their up-thrust heads. I remember seeing the weaker ones crowded in, pushed down to vanish in the murky water. These carcasses would wash up down current, where the short-nosed bears and the wolves and eagles and ravens waited for them. But I stood with others. Father, mother, perhaps sisters and brothers – just others – my eyes on the vast herd.*

*Their seasonal migration, and this was but one of many places of crossing. The caribou often chose different paths. Still, the river had to be crossed, and the beasts would mill for half a morning on the bank, until they*

*plunged into the current, until all at once they were flooding the river, a surging tide of hide and flesh, of breaths drawn in and gusted out.*

*Not even the beasts display eagerness when accosting the inevitable, when it seems numbers alone can possibly confuse fate, and so each life strives, strikes out into the icy flow. 'Save me.' That is what is written in their eyes. 'Save me above all the others. Save me, so that I may live. Give me this moment, this day, this season. I will follow the laws of my kind . . .'*

She remembered that one moment when she was a child, and she remembered her sense of awe in witnessing the crossing, in that force of nature, that imposition of will, its profound implacability. She remembered, too, the terror she had felt.

*Caribou are not just caribou. The crossing is not just this crossing. The caribou are all life. The river is the passing world. Life swims through, riding the current, swims, drowns, triumphs. Life can ask questions. Life – some of it – can even ask: how is it that I can ask anything at all? And: how is it that I believe that answers answer anything worthwhile? What value this exchange, this precious dialogue, when the truth is unchanged, when some live for a time while others drown, when in the next season there are new caribou while others are for ever gone?*

*The truth is unchanged.*

*Each spring, in the time of crossing, the river is in flood. Chaos swirls beneath the surface. It is the worst time.*

*Watch us.*

The child had not wanted to see. The child had wailed and fled inland. Brothers and sisters pursued, laughing maybe, not understanding her fear, her despair. Someone pursued, anyway. Laughing, unless it was the river that laughed, and it was the herd of caribou that surged up from the bank and lunged forward, driving the watchers to scatter, shouting their surprise. Perhaps that was what had made her run. She wasn't sure.

The memory ended with her panic, her cries, her confusion.

Lying on the cross-beam, the wood sweating beneath her, Apsal'ara felt like that child once again. The season was coming. The river awaited her, in fullest flood, and she was but one among many, praying for fate's confusion.

A hundred stones flung into a pond will shatter the smooth surface, will launch a clash of ripples and waves until the eye loses all sense of order in what it sees.

And this discordant moment perturbs the self, awakens unease in the spirit and leaves one restive. So it was that morning in Darujhistan. Surfaces had been shattered. People moved and every move betrayed agitation. People spoke and they were abrupt in their speech and they were short with others, strangers and dear ones alike.

A squall of rumours rode the turgid currents, and some held more truth than others, but all of them hinted of something unpleasant, something unwelcome and disorderly. Such sensibilities can grip a city and hold tight for days, sometimes weeks, sometimes for ever. Such sensibilities could spread like a plague to infect an entire nation, an entire people, leaving them habituated in their anger, perpetually belligerent, inclined to cruelty and miserly with their compassion.

Blood had been spilled in the night. More corpses than usual had been found in the morning, a score or more of them in the Estates District, delivering a thunderous shock to the coddled highborn citizens in their walled homes. Spurred by frantic demands for investigation, the City Guard brought in court mages to conduct magical examinations. Before long a new detail was whispered that widened eyes, that made citizens gasp. *Assassins! One and all – the Guild has been devastated!* And, following this, on a few faces, a sly smile of pleasure – quickly hidden or saved for private moments, since one could never be too careful. Still, the evil killers had clearly taken on someone nastier than them, and had paid for it with dozens of lives.

Some then grew somewhat more thoughtful – oh, they were rare enough to make one, well, depressed. None the less, for these there followed a rather ominous question: *precisely who is in this city who can with impunity cut down a score of deadly assassins?*

As chaotic as that morning was, what with official carriages and corpse-wagons rattling this way and that; with squads of guards and crowds of gawping onlookers and the hawkers who descended among them with sweetened drinks and sticky candies and whatnot; with all this, none made note of the closed, boarded-up K'rul's Bar with its freshly washed walls and flushed gutters.

It was just as well.

*

Krute of Talient stepped into his squalid room and saw Rallick Nom slouched in a chair. Grunting, Krute walked over to the niche that passed for a kitchen and set down the burlap sack with its load of vegetables, fruit and wrapped fish.

'Not seen you much of late,' he said.

'It's a foolish war,' Rallick Nom said without looking up.

'I'm sure Seba Krafar agrees with you this morning. They struck, in what they must have imagined was overwhelming force, only to get mauled. If this keeps up Seba will be Master in a Guild of one.'

'You sound foul of mood, Krute. Why does it matter to you that Seba is making mistakes?'

'Because I gave my life to the Guild, Rallick.' Krute stood with a turnip in one hand. After a moment he flung it into the basket beside the cask of fresh water. 'He's single-handedly destroying it. True, he'll be gone soon enough, but what will be left by then?'

Rallick rubbed at his face. 'Everyone's mood is sour these days, it seems.'

'What are we waiting for?'

Krute could not long hold Rallick's gaze when the assassin finally looked at him. There was something so . . . remorseless in those cold eyes, in that hard face that seemed carved to refute for ever the notion of a smile. A face that could not soften, could not relax into anything human. No wonder he'd been Vorcan's favourite.

Krute fidgeted with the food he'd purchased. 'You hungry?' he asked.

'What did you have in mind?'

'Fish stew.'

'In a few bells it'll be hot enough outside to melt lead.'

'That's what I'm cooking, Rallick.'

Sighing, the assassin rose and stretched. 'Think I'll take a walk instead.'

'As you like.'

At the door Rallick paused and glanced over, his expression suddenly wry. 'It wears off, doesn't it?'

Krute frowned. 'What does?'

Rallick did not reply, and moments later he was gone, the door closing behind him.

*'What does?' Did I have any reason there to be so obtuse? Must have, though I can't think of one right now. Maybe just . . . instinctive. Yes, Rallick Nom, it wears off. Fast.*

*Things were easier before – should have recognized that back then. Should have liked things just fine. Should have stopped gnawing.*

On her hands and knees, Thordy rubbed the ashes into the spaces between the set stones, into every crack and fissure, every groove scoring the vaguely flat surfaces. Tiny bits of bone rolled under her fingertips. No ash was perfect unless it came from nothing but wood, and this ash was made of more things than just wood. The dry season had, she hoped, finally arrived. Otherwise she might have to do this all over again, to keep the glyphs hidden, the pleasant, beautiful glyphs with all the promises they whispered to her.

She heard the back door swing open on its leather hinges and knew Gaz was standing on the threshold, eyes hooded, watching her. His fingerless hands twitching at the ends of his arms, the ridge of knuckles marred and bright red, teeth-cut and bone-gouged.

He killed people every night, she knew, to keep from killing her. She was, she knew, the cause of their deaths. Every one of them a substitute for what Gaz really wanted to do.

She heard him step outside.

Straightening, wiping the ash from her hands on her apron, she turned.

'Breakfast leavings,' he muttered.

'What?'

'The house is full of flies,' he said, standing there as if struck rooted by the sunlight. Red-shot eyes wandered about the yard as if wanting to crawl out from his head and find shelter. Beneath that rock, or the bleached plank of grey wood, or under the pile of kitchen scraps.

'You need a shave,' she said. 'Want me to heat the water?'

The haunted eyes flicked towards her – but there was nowhere to hide in that direction, so he looked away once more. 'No, don't touch me.'

She thought of holding the razor in her hand, settling its edge against his throat. Seeing the runnels winding down through the lathered soap, the throb of his pulse. 'Well,' she said, 'the beard hides how thin you've become. In the face, anyway.'

His smile was a threat. 'And you prefer that, wife?'

'It's just different, Gaz.'

'You can't prefer anything when you don't care, right?'

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't have to. Why'd you make that stone thing – right there on the best dirt?'

'I just felt like it,' she replied. 'A place to sit and rest. Where I can keep an eye on all the vegetables.'

'In case they run away?'

'No. I just like looking at them, that's all.' *They don't ask questions. They don't ask for much of anything at all. A few dribbles of water, maybe. A clear path to the sun, free of any weeds.*

*They don't get suspicious. They don't think about murdering me.*

'Have supper ready for dusk,' Gaz said, lurching into motion.

She watched him leave. Gritty ash made black crescents of her fingernails, as if she had been rooting through the remnants of a pyre. Which was appropriate, because she had, but Gaz didn't need to know things like that. He didn't need to know anything at all.

*Be a plant, Gaz. Worry about nothing. Until the harvest.*

*

The ox was too stupid to worry. If not for a lifetime of back-breaking labour and casual abuse, the beast would be content, existence a smooth cycle to match the ease of day into night and night into day and on and on for ever. Feed and cud aplenty, water to drink and salt to lick, a plague to eradicate the world's biting flies and ticks and fleas. If the ox could dream of paradise, it would be a simple dream and a simple paradise. To live simply was to evade the worries that came with complexity. This end was achieved at the expense, alas, of intelligence.

The drunks that staggered out of the taverns as the sun rose were in search of paradise and they had the sodden, besotted brains to prove it. Lying senseless in the durhang and d'bayang dens could be found others oozing down a similar path. The simplicity they would find was of course death, the threshold crossed almost without effort.

Unmindful (naturally) of any irony, the ox pulled a cart into an alley behind the dens where three emaciated servants brought out this night's crop of wasted corpses. The carter, standing with a switch to one side, spat out a mouthful of rustleaf juice and silently gestured to another body lying in the gutter behind a back door. In for a sliver, in for a council. Grumbling, the three servants went over to this corpse and reached for limbs to lift it from

the cobblestones. One then gasped and recoiled, and a moment later so too did the others.

The ox was not flicked into motion for some time thereafter, as humans rushed about, as more arrived. It could smell the death, but it was used to that. There was much confusion, yet the yoked beast remained an island of calm, enjoying the shade of the alley.

The city guardsman with the morning ache in his chest brushed a hand along the ox's broad flank as he edged past. He crouched down to inspect the corpse.

Another one, this man beaten so badly he was barely recognizable as human. Not a single bone in his face was left unbroken. The eyes were pulped. Few teeth remained. The blows had continued, down to his crushed throat – which was the likely cause of death – and then his chest. Whatever weapon had been used left short, elongated patterns of mottled bruising. Just like all the others.

The guardsman rose and faced the three servants from the dens. 'Was he a customer?'

Three blank faces regarded him, then one spoke, 'How in Hood's name can we tell? His damned face is gone!'

'Clothing? Weight, height, hair colour – anyone in there last—'

'Sir,' cut in the man, 'if he was a customer he was a new one – he's got meat on his bones, see? And his clothes was clean. Well, before he spilled hisself.'

The guardsman had made the same observations. 'Might he have been, then? A new customer?'

'Ain't been none in the last day or so. Some casuals, you know, the kind who can take it or leave it, but no, we don't think we seen this one, by his clothes and hair and such.'

'So what was he doing in this alley?'

No one had an answer.

Did the guardsman have enough to requisition a necromancer? *Only if this man was well born. But the clothes aren't that high-priced. More like merchant class, or some midlevel official. If so, then what was he doing here in the dregs of Gadrobi District?* 'He's Daru,' he mused.

'We get 'em,' said the loquacious servant, with a faint sneer. 'We get Rhivi, we get Callowan, we get Barghast even.'

*Yes, misery is egalitarian.* 'Into the cart, then, with the others.'

The servants set to work.

The guardsman watched. After a moment his gaze drifted to the carter. He studied the wizened face with its streaks of rustleaf juice running down the stubbled chin.

'Got a loving woman back home?'

'Eh?'

'I imagine that ox is happy enough.'

'Oh, aye, that it is, sir. All the flies, see, they prefer the big sacks.'

'The what?'

The carter squinted at him, then stepped closer. 'The bodies, sir. Big sacks, I call 'em. I done studies and lots of thinking, on important things. On life and stuff. What makes it work, what happens when it stops and all.'

'Indeed. Well—'

'Every body in existence, sir, is made up of the same stuff. So small you can't see except with a special lens but I made me one a those. Tiny, that stuff. I call 'em *bags*. And inside each bag there's a wallet, floating in the middle like. And I figure that in that wallet there's notes.'

'I'm sorry, did you say notes?'

A quick nod, a pause to send out a stream of brown juice. 'With all the details of that body written on 'em. Whether it's a dog or a cat or a green-banded nose-worm. Or a person. And things like hair colour and eye colour

and other stuff – all written on those notes in that wallet in that bag. They're instructions, you see, telling the bag what kind of bag it's supposed to be. Some bags are liver bags, some are skin, some are brain, some are lungs. And it's the mother and the father that sew up them bags, when they make themselves a baby. They sew 'em up, you see, with half and half, an' that's why brats share looks from both ma and da. Now this 'ere ox, it's got bags too that look pretty much the same, so's I been thinking of sewing its half with a human half – wouldn't that be something?'

'Something, good sir, likely to get you run out of the city – if you weren't stoned to death first.'

The carter scowled. 'That's the probbem wi' the world then, ain't it? No sense of adventure!'

'I have a very important meeting.'

Iskaral Pust, still wearing his most ingratiating smile, simply nodded.

Sordiko Qualm sighed. 'It is official Temple business.'

He nodded again.

'I do not desire an escort.'

'You don't need one, High Priestess,' said Iskaral Pust.

'You shall have me!' And then he tilted his head and licked his lips. 'Won't she just! Hee hee! And she'll see that with me she'll have more than she ever believed possible! Why, I shall be a giant walking penis!'

'You already are,' said Sordiko Qualm.

'Are? Are what, dearest? We should get going, lest we be late!'

'Iskaral Pust, I don't want you with me.'

'You're just saying that, but your eyes tell me different.'

'What's in my eyes,' she replied, 'could see me dangling on High Gallows. Assuming, of course, the entire city does not launch into a spontaneous

celebration upon hearing of your painful death, and set me upon a throne of solid gold in acclamation.'

'What is she going on about? No one knows I'm even here! And why would I want a gold throne? Why would she, when she can have *me*?' He licked his lips again, and then revised his smile. 'Lead on, my love. I promise to be most officious in this official meeting. After all, I am the Magus of the House of Shadow. Not a mere High Priest, but a Towering Priest! A Looming Priest! I shall venture no opinions of whatever, unless invited to, of course. No, I shall be stern and wise and leave all the jabbering to my sweet underling.' He ducked and added, 'With whom I shall be underlinging very shortly!'

Her hands twitched oddly, most fetchingly, in fact, and then surrender cascaded in her lovely eyes, thus providing Iskaral Pust with the perfect image to resurrect late at night under his blankets with Mogora snoring through all the spider balls filled with eggs lodged up her nose.

'You will indeed be silent, Iskaral Pust. The one with whom I must speak does not tolerate fools, and I will make no effort to intercede should you prove fatally obnoxious.' She paused and shook her head. 'Then again, I cannot imagine you being anything but obnoxious. Perhaps I should retract my warning, in the hope that you will give such offence as to see you instantly obliterated. Whereupon I can then evict those foul bhokarala and your equally foul wife.' Sudden surprise. 'Listen to me! Those thoughts were meant to be private! Yours is a most execrable influence, Iskaral Pust.'

'Soon we shall be as peas in a pod! Those spiny, sharp pods that stick to everything, especially crotch hair if one is forced to wee in the bushes.' He reached out for her. 'Hand in hand gliding down the streets!'

She seemed to recoil, but of course that was only his delicate and fragile self-esteem and its niggling worries, quickly buried beneath the plastering of yet another ingratiating smile on his face.

They escaped the temple through a little used side postern gate, slamming it shut just in time to avoid the squall of bhokarala excitedly pursuing them down the corridor.

Wretched sunshine in the streets, Sordiko Qualm seemingly indifferent to such atmospheric disregard – why, not a single cloud in sight! Worse than Seven Cities, with not a crevasse to be found anywhere.

Miserable crowds to thread through, a sea of ill-tempered faces snapping round at the gentle prod of his elbows and shoulders as he hurried to keep pace with the long-legged High Priestess. 'Long legs, yes! Ooh. Ooh ooh ooh. Look at them scythe, see the waggle of those delicious—'

'Quiet!' she hissed over a shapely shoulder.

'Shadowthrone understood. Yes he did. He saw the necessity of our meeting, her and me. The consummation of Shadow's two most perfect mortals. The fated storybook love – the lovely innocent woman – but not too innocent, one hopes – and the stalwart man with his brave smile and warm thews. Er, brave thews and warm smile. Is "thews" even the right word? Muscled arms and such, anyway. Why, I am a mass of muscles, am I not? I can even make my ears flex, when the need presents itself – no point in showing off. She despises the strutting type, being delicate and all.

And soon—'

'Watch that damned elbow, runt!'

'And soon the glory will be delivered unto us—'

'—a damned apology!'

'What?'

A hulking oaf of a man was forcing himself into Iskaral Pust's path, his big flat face looking like something one found at the bottom of a nightsoil bucket. 'I said I expect a damned apology, y'damned toad-faced ferret!'

Iskaral Pust snorted. 'Oh, look, a hulking oaf of a man with a big flat face looking like something one finds at the bottom of a nightsoil bucket wants *me* to apologize! And I will, good sir, as soon as you apologize for your oafishness and your bucket-face – in fact, apologize for existing!'

The enormous apish hand that reached for his throat was so apish that it barely possessed a thumb, or so Iskaral Pust would later report to his wide-

eyed murmuring audience of bhokarala.

Naturally, he ignored that hand and did some reaching out of his own, straight into the oaf's crotch, where he squeezed and yanked back and forth and tugged and twisted, even as the brute folded up with a whimper and collapsed like a sack of melons on to the filthy cobbles, where he squirmed most pitifully.

Iskaral Pust stepped over him and hurried to catch up to Sordiko Qualm, who seemed to have increased her pace, her robes veritably flying out behind her.

'The rudeness of some people!' Iskaral Pust gasped.

They arrived at the gates of a modest estate close to Hinter's Tower. The gates were locked and Sordiko Qualm tugged on a braided rope, triggering chiming from somewhere within.

They waited.

Chains rattled on the other side of the gates, and a moment later the solid doors creaked open, streams of rust drifting down from the hinges.

'Not many visitors, I take it?'

'From this moment on,' said Sordiko Qualm, 'you will be silent, Iskaral Pust.'

'I will?'

'You will.'

Whoever had opened the gates seemed to be hiding behind one of them, and the High Priestess strode in without any further ceremony. Iskaral Pust rushed in behind her to avoid being locked out, as both gates immediately began closing. As soon as he was clear he turned to upbraid the rude servant. And saw, working a lever to one side, a Seguleh.

'Thank you, Thurule,' said Sordiko. 'Is the Lady in the garden?'

There was no reply.

The High Priestess nodded and walked on, along a winding path through an overgrown, weedy courtyard, its walls covered in wisteria in full bloom. Sordiko paused upon seeing a large snake coiled in the sun on the path, then edged carefully round it.

Iskaral crept after her, eyes on the nasty creature as it lifted its wedge-shaped head, tongue flicking out in curiosity or maybe hunger. He hissed at it as he passed and was pleased at its flinch.

The estate's main house was small, elegant in a vaguely feminine way. Arched pathways went round it on both sides, vine-webbed tunnels blissfully draped in shadows. The High Priestess chose one and continued on towards the back.

As they drew closer they heard the murmur of voices.

The centre of the back garden was marked by a flagstone clearing in which stood a dozen full-sized bronze statues in a circle facing inward. Each statue wept water from its oddly shielded face down into the ringed trough it stood in, where water flowed ankle deep. The statues, Iskaral Pust saw with faint alarm as they drew closer, were of Seguleh, and the water that fell down did so from beneath masks sheathed in moss and verdigris. In the middle of the circle was a thin-legged, quaint table of copper and two chairs.

In the chair facing them sat a man with long grey hair.

There was blood-spatter on his plain shirt. A woman was seated with her back to them. Long, lustrous black hair shimmered, contrasting perfectly with the white linen of her blouse.

Upon seeing Sordiko Qualm and Iskaral Pust the man rose and bowed to his host. 'Milady, until next time.'

A second, sketchier bow to the High Priestess and Iskaral, and then he was walking past.

Sordiko Qualm entered the circle and positioned herself to the right of the now vacated chair. To Iskaral Pust's astonishment (and, a moment later, delight) she curtsied before her host. 'Lady Envy.'

'Do sit, my love,' Lady Envy replied. Then, as Iskaral Pust hovered into view, seeing at last her exquisite face, so perfect a match to that lovely hair, and the poise of her, er, pose, there in that spindly chair with her legs crossed revealing the underside of one shapely thigh just begging for a caress, she scowled and said, 'Perhaps I should get a sandbox installed for your foundling, High Priestess? Somewhere to play and soak up his drool.'

'We would, alas, have to bury him in it.'

'Interesting suggestion.'

Thurule then arrived with another chair. The similarity between him and the statues was somewhat disquieting, and Iskaral Pust shivered as he quickly bowed to Lady Envy then perched himself on the chair.

'Her beauty challenges even that of the High Priestess! Why, imagine the two of them—'

'Iskaral Pust!' snapped Sordiko Qualm. 'I did instruct you to be quiet, did I not?'

'But I said nothing, my love! Nothing at all!'

'I am not your love, nor will I ever be.'

He smiled, and then said, 'I will play these two beauties off one another, driving both to spasms of jealousy with my charm, as it slides so easily from one to the other. Pluck here, brush there! Oh, this will be such a delight!'

'I am of a mind to kill him,' said Lady Envy to Sordiko Qualm.

'Alas, he is the Magus of Shadow.'

'You cannot be serious!'

'Oh yes!' cried Iskaral Pust. 'She is! Furthermore, it is most propitious that I am here, for I know something you do not!'

'Oh, goodness,' sighed Lady Envy. 'A beautiful morning thus shattered into ruin.'

'Who was he?' Iskaral demanded. 'That man who was here? Who was he?'

'Why should I tell you that?'

'In exchange – you satisfy my curiosity and I yours – and so we shall satisfy each other and how do you like that, Sordiko Qualm? Hah!'

Lady Envy rubbed at her temples for a moment, as if overwhelmed, and then said, 'That was the bard, Fisher kel Tath. A most unusual man. He . . . invites confession. There have been dire events in the city—'

'None so dire as what I would tell you!' said Iskaral Pust.

And now Sordiko was rubbing at her own brow.

'It's working!'

Lady Envy eyed him. 'If I grant you this exchange, Magus, will you then restrain yourself, thus permitting the High Priestess and me to conduct our conversation?'

'My restraint is guaranteed, Lady Envy. Of course, I make this promise only if you do the same.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Lady Envy, I arrived on a ship.'

'What of it?'

'A ship owned by a most delicious woman—'

'Oh, not another one!' moaned Sordiko Qualm.

'The poor thing,' said Lady Envy.

'Hardly.' Iskaral Pust leaned back in his chair, tilting it up on its legs so that his view could encompass both women. 'How I dream of such moments as this! See how they hang on my every word! I have them, I have them!' 'What is wrong with this man, High Priestess?'

'I could not begin to tell you.'

Iskaral Pust examined his hands, his fingernails – but that made him slightly nauseous, since the bhokarala were in the habit of sucking on his fingertips when he slept at night, leaving them permanently wrinkled, mangled and decidedly unpleasant, so he looked away, casually, and found himself staring at Thurule, which wasn't a good idea either, so, over there, at that flower – safe enough, he supposed – until it was time at last to meet Lady Envy's extraordinary eyes. 'Yes,' he drawled, 'I see the similarity at last, although you were the victor in the war of perfection. Not by much, but triumphant none the less and for that I can only applaud and admire and all that. In any case, resident even at this very moment, on the ship, in the harbour, is none other than your beloved sister, Spite!'

'I thought so!' Lady Envy was suddenly on her feet, trembling in her . . . excitement?

Iskaral Pust sniggered. 'Yes, I play at this until they play no more, and all truths are revealed, as sensibilities are rocked back and forth, as shock thunders through the cosmos, as the shadows themselves explode into all existence! For am I not the Magus of Shadow? Oh, but I am, I am!' He then leaned forward with an expression of gravid dismay. 'Are you not delighted, Lady Envy? Shall I hasten to her to forward your invitation to visit this wondrous garden? Instruct me as your servant, please! Whatever you wish, I will do! Of course I won't! I'll do whatever I want to. Let her think otherwise – maybe it'll bring some colour back to her face, maybe it'll calm the storm in her eyes, maybe it'll stop the water in this trough from boiling – impressive detail, by the way, now, what should I say next?'

Sordiko Qualm and Lady Envy never did get to their conversation that day.

Grainy-eyed and exhausted, Cutter went in search of somewhere to eat breakfast. Once his belly was full, he'd head back to the Phoenix Inn and collapse on his bed upstairs. This was the extent of his tactical prowess and even achieving that had been a struggle. He would be the last man to downplay the extraordinary variety of paths a life could take, and there were few blessings he could derive from having come full circle – from his journey and the changes wrought in himself between the Darujhistan of old

and this new place – and yet the contrast with the fate that had taken Challice Vidikas had left him numbed, disorientated and feeling lost.

He found an empty table in the half-courtyard restaurant facing Borthen Park, an expensive establishment that reminded him he was fast running out of coin, and sat waiting for one of the servers to take note of him. The staff were Rhivi one and all, three young women dressed in some new obscure fashion characterized by long swishing skirts of linen streaked in indigo dye, and tight black leather vests with nothing underneath. Their hair was bound up in knotted braids, revealing bisected clamshells stitched over their ears. While this latter affectation was quaint the most obvious undesirable effect was that twice one of the servers sauntered past him and did not hear his attempts to accost her. He resolved to stick out a leg the next time, then was shocked at such an ungracious impulse.

At last he caught the attention of one of them and she approached. 'A pot of tea, please, and whatever you're serving for breakfast.'

Seeing his modest attire, she glanced away as she asked, in a bored tone, 'Fruit breakfast or meat breakfast? Eggs? Bread? Honey? What kind of tea – we have twenty-three varieties.'

He frowned up at her. 'Er, you decide.'

'Excuse me?'

'What did you have this morning?'

'Flatcakes, of course. What I always have.'

'Do you serve those here?'

'Of course not.'

'What kind of tea did you drink?'

'I didn't. I drank beer.'

'Rhivi custom?'

'No,' she replied, still looking away, 'it's my way of dealing with the excitement of my day.'

'Gods below, just bring me something. Meat, bread, honey. No fancy rubbish with the tea, either.'

'Fine,' she snapped, flouncing off in a billow of skirts.

Cutter squeezed the bridge of his nose in an effort to fend off a burgeoning headache. He didn't want to think about the night just past, the bell after bell spent in that graveyard, sitting on that stone bench with Challice all too close by his side. Seeing, as the dawn's light grew, what the handful of years had done to her, the lines of weariness about her eyes, the lines bracketing her mouth, the maturity revealed in a growing heaviness, her curves more pronounced than they had once been. The child he had known was still there, he told himself, beneath all of that. In the occasional gesture, in the hint of a soft laugh at one point. No doubt she saw the same in him – the layers of hardness, the vestiges of loss and pain, the residues of living.

He was not the same man. She was not the same woman. Yet they had sat as if they had once known each other. As if they were old friends. Whatever childish hopes and vain ambitions had sparked the space between them years ago, they were deftly avoided, even as their currents coalesced into something romantic, something oddly nostalgic.

It had been the lively light ever growing in her eyes that most disturbed Cutter, especially since he had felt his own answering pleasure – in the hazy reminiscences they had played with, in the glow lifting between them on that bench that had nothing to do with the rising sun.

There was nothing right about any of this. She was married, after all. She was nobility – but no, that detail was without relevance, for what she had proposed had nothing to do with matters of propriety, was in no way intended to invite public scrutiny.

*She is bored. She wants a lover. She wants what she could have had but didn't take. A second chance, that's what she wants.*

*Do second chances even exist?*

This would be . . . sordid. Despicable. How could he even contemplate such a thing?

*Maybe Apsalar saw all too well. Saw right into me, to the soul that was less than it should have been, to the will that was weak. I do not stand before a woman, do I? No, I fall into her arms. I change shape to fit each one, to make things snug, as if matching their dreams is the only path I know into their hearts.*

*Maybe she was right to walk away.*

Was this all that Challice wanted? An amusing diversion to alleviate the drudgery of her comfortable life? He admitted to some suspicion that things were not that simple. There had been a darker current, as if to take him meant something more to Challice. Proof of her own descent, perhaps. Her own fall. Or something else, something even more pernicious.

The Rhivi server had brought him a pot of tea, a plate of fresh bread, a dipping jar of honey, and a bowl of diced fruit. He now stared at the array on the table in front of him, trying without success to recall the moment it had all arrived.

'I need you,' she had said, the words cutting through his exhaustion as the sky began to show its colour. 'Crokus. Cutter. Whatever name you want. I knew it the moment I saw you. I had been walking, most of the night, just walking. I didn't know it, but I was looking for someone. My life's become a question that I thought no one could answer. Not my husband, not anyone. And then, there you were, standing in this cemetery, like a ghost.'

Oh, he knew about ghosts, the way they could haunt one day and night. The way they found places to hide in one's own soul. Yes, he knew about ghosts. 'Challice—'

'You loved me once. But I was young. A fool. Now, I am neither young nor a fool. This time, I won't turn away.'

'Your husband—'

'Doesn't care what I do, or with whom I do it.'

'Why did you marry him then?'

She had looked away, and it was some time before she replied. 'When he saved my life, that night in the garden of Simtal's estate, it was as if he then owned it. My life. He owned it because he saved it. He wasn't alone in believing that, either. So did I. All at once, it was as if I no longer had any choice. He possessed my future, to do with as he pleased.'

'Your father—'

'Should have counselled me?' She laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. 'You didn't see it, but I was spoiled. I was obnoxious, Crokus. Maybe he tried, I don't really recall. But I think he was happy to see me go.'

No, this was not the Challice he had known.

'House Vidikas owns an annexe, a small building down by the docks. It's almost never used. There are two levels. On the main floor it's just storage, filled with the shipwright's leavings after the trader boat was finished. On the upper level is where the man lived while under contract. I've . . . seen it, and I have a key.'

Seen it? He wondered at her hesitation in that admission. But not for long. *She's used it before. She's using it still. For trysts just like the one she's talking about right now. Challice, why are you bothering with me?*

At his hesitation she leaned closer, one hand on his arm. 'We can just meet there, Crokus. To talk. A place where we can talk about anything, where there's no chance of being seen. We can just talk.'

He knew, of course, that such a place was not for talking.

And, this evening, he would meet her there.

What was he— 'Ow!'

The server had just cuffed him in the side of the head. Astonished, he stared up at her.

'If I go to all that work to make you a damned breakfast, you'd better eat it!'

'Sorry! I was just thinking—'

'It's easier when you're chewing. Now, don't make me have to come back here.'

He glared at her as she walked away. *If I was nobleborn she'd never have done that.* He caught the eye of a man sitting at a nearby table.

'You have a way with women, I see.'

'Hah hah.'

Events and moments can deliver unexpected mercy, and though she did not know it, such mercy was granted to Scillara at that instant, for she was not thinking of Cutter. Instead, she was sitting beside the Malazan historian, Duiker, fighting an instinct to close her arms round him and so in some small measure ease his silent grief. All that held her back, she knew, was the fear that he would not welcome her sympathy. That, and the distinct possibility that she was misreading him.

To live a hard life was to make solid and impregnable every way in, until no openings remained and the soul hid in darkness, and no one else could hear its screams, its railing at injustice, its long, agonizing stretches of sadness. Hardness without created hardness within.

Sadness was, she well knew, not something that could be cured. It was not, in fact, a failing, not a flaw, not an illness of spirit. Sadness was never without reason, and to assert that it marked some kind of dysfunction did little more than prove ignorance or, worse, cowardly evasiveness in the one making the assertion. As if happiness was the only legitimate way of being. As if those failing at it needed to be locked away, made soporific with medications; as if the causes of sadness were merely traps and pitfalls in the proper climb to blissful contentment, things to be edged round or bridged, or leapt across on wings of false elation.

Scillara knew better. She had faced her own sadness often enough. Even when she discovered her first means of escaping it, in durhang, she'd known that such an escape was simply a flight from feelings that existed

legitimately. She'd just been unable to permit herself any sympathy for such feelings, because to do so was to surrender to their truth.

Sadness belonged. As rightful as joy, love, grief and fear. All conditions of being.

Too often people mistook the sadness in others for self-pity, and in so doing revealed their own hardness of spirit, and more than a little malice.

The taproom stank of blood, shit, piss and vomit. Blend was recovering in her bedroom upstairs, as close to death as she'd ever been, but the worst was past, now. Barathol and Chaur had gone down to the cellars below to help Picker and Antsy bury the bodies of their comrades. The blacksmith's grief at the death of his new friend, Mallet, was too raw for Scillara to face – he was in no way a hard man and this jarred her frail assembly of beliefs, for he should have been. Yet had she not seen the same breathless vulnerability when he'd struggled to bring Chaur back to life after the huge simpleton had drowned?

'He is . . .' Duiker began, and then frowned, 'a remarkable man, I think.'

Scillara blinked. 'Who?'

The historian shook his head, unwilling to meet her eyes. 'I should be getting drunk.'

'Never works,' she said.

'I know.'

They were silent again, moments stretching on.

*We just stumbled into these people. A crazy contest at a restaurant. We were just getting to know them, to treasure each and every one of them.*

*Mallet was a healer. A Bridgeburner.* In his eyes there had burned some kind of self-recrimination, a welter of guilt. A healer tortured by something he could not heal. A list of failures transformed into failings. Yet he had been a gentle man. That soft, oddly high voice – which they would never hear again.

For him, Barathol had wept.

Bluepearl was a mage. Amusingly awkward, kind of wide-eyed, which hardly fit all that he'd been through, because he too had been a Bridgeburner. Antsy had railed over the man's corpse, a sergeant dressing down a soldier so incompetent as to be dead. Antsy had been offended, indignant, even as anguish glittered in his bright blue eyes. *'You damned fool!'* he'd snarled. *'You Hood-damned useless idiotic fool!'* When he'd made to kick the body Picker had roughly pulled him back, almost off his feet, and Antsy had lurched off to slam the toe of one boot into the planks of the counter.

They looked older now. Picker, Antsy. Wan and redeyed, shoulders slumped, not bothering to rinse the dried blood from their faces, hands and forearms.

Duiker alone seemed unchanged, as if these last deaths had been little more than someone pissing into a wide, deep river. His sadness was an absolute thing, and he never came up for air. She wanted to take him in her arms and *shake* the life back into him. Yet she would not do that, for she knew such a gesture would be a selfish one, serving only her own needs. As much, perhaps, as her initial impulse to embrace him in sympathy.

Because she too felt like weeping. For having dragged the historian out into the city – away from what had happened here the past night. For having saved his life.

When they'd first arrived back; when they'd seen the bodies on the street; when they'd stepped inside to look upon the carnage, Duiker had shot her a single glance, and in that she had read clearly the thought behind it. *See what you took me away from?* A thought so far away from the sentiment of gratitude that it might as well be in another realm.

The truth was obvious. He would rather have been here. He would rather have died last night. Instead, interfering bitch that she was, Scillara had refused him that release. Had instead left him in this sad life that would not end. That glance had been harder, more stinging, than a savage slap in the face.

She should have gone below. Should be standing there in that narrow, cramped cellar, holding Chaur's hand, listening to them all grieve, each in their own way. Antsy's curses. Picker at his side, so close as to be leaning on him, but otherwise expressionless beyond the bleakness of her glazed stare. Barathol and his glistening beard, his puffy eyes, the knotted muscles ravaging his brow.

The door opened suddenly, sending a shaft of daylight through suspended dust, and in stepped the grey-haired bard.

She and Duiker watched as the man shut the door behind him and replaced the solid iron bar in its slots – how he had ended up with that bar in his hands was a mystery, yet neither Scillara nor the historian commented.

The man approached, and she saw that he too had not bothered to change his clothes, wearing the old blood with the same indifference she had seen in the others.

There'd been a half-dozen bodies, maybe more, at the stage. A passing observation from Blend implicated the bard in that slaughter, but Scillara had trouble believing that. This man was gaunt, old. Yet her eyes narrowed on the blood spatter on his shirt.

He sat down opposite them, met Duiker's eyes, and said, 'Whatever they have decided to do, Historian, they can count me in.'

'So they did try for you, too,' said Scillara.

He met her gaze. 'Scillara, they attacked everyone in the room. They killed innocents.'

'I don't think they'll do anything,' said Duiker, 'except sell up and leave.'

'Ah,' the bard said, then sighed. 'No matter. I will not be entirely on my own in any case.'

'What do you mean?'

'I called in an old favour, Historian. Normally, I am not one to get involved in . . . things.'

'But you're angry,' Scillara observed, recognizing at last the odd flatness in the old man's eyes, the flatness that came before – *before cold killing. This poet has claws indeed. And now I look at him, he's not as old as I thought he was.*

'I am, yes.'

From below there came a splintering *crack* followed by shouts of surprise. All three at the table swiftly rose. Duiker leading the way, they ran to the kitchen, then down the narrow stairs to the cellar. Torchlight wavered at the far end of the elongated storage room, casting wild shadows on a bizarre scene. Pungent fluid sloshed on the earthen floor, seeming reluctant to drain, and in a half-circle stood the two Malazans, Barathol and Chaur, all facing one side wall where a large cask had shattered.

Antsy, Scillara surmised, had just kicked it.

Splitting it open, in a cascade of pickling juice, revealing to them all the object that that liquid had so perfectly preserved.

Folded up with knees beneath chin, arms wrapped round the shins.

Still wearing a mask on which four linear, vertical barbs marked a row across the forehead.

The bard grunted. 'I'd often wondered,' he said under his breath, 'where the old ones ended up.'

The fluids were now seeping into the floor, along the edges of the freshly dug mounds.

*

A hundred stones, a cavort of ripples, the city in its life which is one life which is countless lives. To ignore is to deny brotherhood, sisterhood, the commonality that, could it be freed, would make the world a place less cruel, less vicious. But who has time for that? Rush this way, plunge that way, evade every set of eyes, permit no recognition in any of the faces flashing past. The dance of trepidation is so very tiresome.

Hold this gaze, if you dare, in the tracking of these tremulous ripples, the lives, *the lives!* See Stonny Menackis, wrought with recrimination, savaged by guilt. She sleeps badly or not at all (who would risk peering into her dark bedroom at night, for fear of seeing the gleam of staring eyes?). She trembles, her nerves like strings of fire, whilst poor Murillio stands apart, desperate to comfort her, to force open all that had now closed between them.

And in the courtyard a mob of unattended young savages wail about with wooden swords and it's a miracle no one's yet lost an eye or dropped to the pavestones with a crushed trachea.

While, in a workroom not too far away, Tiserra sits at the potter's wheel and stares into space as the lump of clay spins round and round to the rhythm of her pumping foot – struck frozen, shocked by the stunning realization of the sheer depth of her love for her husband. A love so fierce that she is terrified, comprehending at last the extent of her vulnerability.

The sense is a wonder. It is delicious and terrifying. It is *ecstatic*.

Smile with her. Oh, do smile with her!

Whilst at this very moment, the object of Tiserra's devotion strides into the courtyard of the Varada estate, his new place of employment. His mind, which had been calm in the course of his walk from home, now stirs with faint unease. He had sent Scorch and Leff home, and he had stood at the gate watching them stumble off like undead, and this had made him think of moments of greatest danger – just before dawn was the moment to strike, if one intended such violence – but who would bother? What was this mysterious Lady Varada up to anyway?

A seat on the Council, true, but was that sufficient cause for assassination? And why was he thinking of such things at all? There'd been rumours – picked up at the drunk baker's stall – that the night just past should have belonged to the Assassins' Guild but had turned sour for the hired killers and oh, wasn't that regrettable? A moment of silence then pass the dumplings, if you please.

Now he paused in the courtyard, seeing the latest employees, his peculiar charges, with their dubious pasts and potentially alarming motivations. Reunited, yes, with the castellan, with the infamous Studious Lock. Madrun and Lazan Door were tossing knuckles against the compound wall to his right. Technically, their shift was over, although Torvald Nom suspected that this game of theirs had been going on for some time. Another word of warning to them? No, his spirits were already plunging, as they were wont to do when he awakened to a sense that something was being pulled over him, that he was being connived around – as his mother used to say when with one foot she pinned young Torvald to the floor and stared down at him as he squirmed and thrashed (mostly an act, of course; she weighed about as much as a guard dog, without the bite). Connived around, dear boy, and when I get to the bottom of things and all the trouble's on the table, why, who will I find hiding in the closet? His sweet mother never quite mastered the extended metaphor, bless her.

Suddenly too despondent to so much as announce his arrival, Torvald Nom headed for his office, eager to climb over the desk and plant himself in the chair, where he could doze until the sounding of the lunch chime. At least the cooks she'd employed knew their business.

Leave him there, now, and ride one last ripple, out beyond the city, west along the lakeshore, out to a dusty, smoky pit where the less privileged laboured through their shortened lives to keep such creatures as Gorlas Vidikas and Humble Measure at the level of comfort and entitlement they held to be righteous. And, to be fair, they laboured as well to contribute to the general feeling of civilization, which is normally measured by technical wherewithal, a sense of progression and the notion of structural stability, little of which said labourers could themselves experience, save vicariously.

The child Harllo has been lashed ten times for being places he wasn't supposed to be, and this punishment was fierce enough to leave him prostrate, lying on his stomach on his cot with thick unguents slowly melting into the wounds on his back.

Bainisk had received a whip to his left shoulder which would result in the third such scar for dereliction of his responsibilities as overseer in Chuffs,

and he now came to sit beside Harllo, studying his young charge in a silence that stretched.

Until at last Harllo said, 'I'm sorry, Bainisk—'

'Never mind that. I just want to know what you were up to. I didn't think you'd keep secrets from me, I really didn't. Venaz is saying "I told you so". He's saying you're no good, Mole, and that I should just push you on to the dredge crews.'

The young ones did not live long in the dredge crews. 'Venaz wants to be your best mole again.'

'I know that, only he's grown too big.'

'People like him never like people like me,' Harllo said. This was not a whine, just an observation.

'Because you're smarter than he is and his being older means nothing, means it's worse even, because in your head you're already past him, past us all, maybe. Listen, Harllo, I seen ones like you before, coming in, going through. They get beaten down, beaten stupid. Or they end up getting killed. Maybe they try to run, maybe they stand up to the pit bosses over something. Your smartness is what's going to ruin you, you understand?'

'Yes, Bainisk. I'm sorry.'

'Why'd you sneak back into the tunnels?'

He could tell him everything. At this moment, it seemed like the right thing to do. But Harllo no longer trusted himself with such feelings. Explaining was dangerous. It could get them all into even more trouble.

'You was carrying bones,' said Bainisk. 'Those bones, they're cursed.'

'Why?'

'They just are.'

'But why, Bainisk?'

'Because they were found where no bones belong, that's why. So far down it's impossible that anybody buried them – and besides, who'd bury dead animals? No, those bones, they're from demons that live in the rock and in the dark. Right down with the roots of the earth. You don't touch them, Harllo, and you never ever try putting them back.'

So this was what Bainisk suspected him of doing, then? 'I was . . . I was scared,' Harllo said. 'It was as if we were disturbing graves or something. And that's why there've been so many accidents lately—'

'Them accidents are because the new boss is pushing us too hard, into the tunnels with the cracked ceilings and the bad air – the kind of air that makes you see things that ain't real.'

'I think maybe that's what happened to me.'

'Maybe, but,' and he rose, 'I don't think so.'

He walked away then. Tomorrow, Harllo was expected to return to work. He was frightened of that, since his back hurt so, but he would do it, because it would make things easier for Bainisk who'd been punished when he shouldn't have been. Harllo would work extra hard, no matter the pain and all; he would work extra hard so Bainisk would like him again.

Because, in this place, with no one liking you, there didn't seem much point in going on.

Lying on his stomach, fresh into another year of life, Harllo felt no ripples reach him from the outside world. Instead, he felt alone. Maybe he'd lost a friend for ever and that felt bad, too. Maybe his only friend was a giant skeleton in the depths of the mines – who with new legs might have walked away, disappeared into the dark, and all Harllo had to remember him by was a handful of tools hidden beneath his cot.

For a child, thinking of the future was a difficult thing, since most thoughts of the future built on memories of the past, whether in continuation or serving as contrast, and a child held few memories of his or her past. The world was truncated forward and back. Measure it from his

toes to the top of his head, tousle the mop of hair in passing, and when nothing else is possible, hope for the best.

In the faint phosphor glow streaking the rock, a T'lan Imass climbed to his feet and stood like someone who had forgotten how to walk. The thick, curved femurs of the emlava forced him into a half-lean, as if he was about to launch himself forward, and the ridged ball of the long bones, where it rested in the socket of each hip, made grinding sounds as he fought for balance.

Unfamiliar sorcery, this. He had observed how connecting tissue had re-knitted, poorly at first, to these alien bones, and he had come to understand that such details were a kind of conceit. The Ritual forced animation with scant subtlety, and whatever physical adjustments occurred proceeded at a snail's pace, although their present incompleteness seemed to have no effect on his ability to settle his weight on these new legs, even to move them into his first lurching step, then his second.

The grinding sounds would fade in time, he thought, as ball and socket were worn into a match, although he suspected he would never stand as erect as he once had.

No matter. Dev'ad Anan Tol was mobile once more. And as he stood, a flood of memories rose within him in a dark tide.

Leading to that last moment, with the Jaghut Tyrant, Raest, standing before him, blood-smeared mace in one hand, as Dev'ad writhed on the stone floor, legs for ever shattered.

No, he had not been flung from a ledge. Sometimes, it was necessary to lie.

He wondered if the weapons he had forged, so long ago now, still remained hidden in their secret place. Not far. After a moment, the T'lan Imass set out. Feet scraping, his entire body pitching from side to side.

Raest's unhuman face twisted indignant. Outraged. Slaves were ever slaves. None could rise to challenge the master. None could dare plot the

master's downfall, none could get as close as Dev'ad had done. Yes, an outrage, a crime against the laws of nature itself.

'I break you, T'lan. I leave you here, in this pit of eternal darkness. To die. To rot. None shall know a word of your mad ambition. All knowledge of you shall fade, shall vanish. Nothing of you shall remain. Know this, could I keep you alive down here for ever, I would – and even that torture would not suffice. In my enforced indifference, T'lan, lies mercy.'

*See me now. I have outlived you, Raest. And there, old friend, lies* my *mercy.*

He came to the secret place, a deep crack in the wall, into which he reached. His hand closed about a heavy, rippled blade, and Dev'ad dragged the weapon out.

The T'lan knew stone, stone that was water and water that was stone. Iron belonged to the Jaghut.

He held up the sword he had made countless thousands of years ago. Yes, it had the form of flint, the ridges encircling every flake struck from the edge, the undulating modulations of parallel flaking and the twin flutes running the length to either side of a wavy dorsal spine. The antler base that formed the grip was now mineralized, a most comforting and pleasing weight.

The form of flint indeed. And yet this sword was made of iron, tempered in the holy fires of Tellann. Impervious to rust, to decay, the huge weapon was the hue of first night, the deep blue sky once the final light of the drowned sun had faded. In the moment of the stars' birth, yes, that was the colour of this blade.

He leaned it point down against the wall and reached into the crack again, drawing out a matching knife – hefty as a shortsword. The hide sheaths had long since rotted to dust, but he would make new ones soon.

The Tyrant of old was gone. Somewhere close, then, waited an empty throne.

Waiting for Dev'ad Anan Tol. Who had once been crippled but was crippled no longer.

He raised both weapons high, the dagger in his right hand, the sword in his left. Slashes of first night, in the moment of the stars' birth. Iron in the guise of stone, iron in the guise of stone that is water and water that is stone and stone that is iron. Jaghut tyranny in the hands of a T'lan Imass.

The gods are fools, alas, in believing every piece in the game is known. That the rules are fixed and accepted by all; that every wager is counted and marked, exposed and glittering on the table. The gods lay out their perfect paths to the perfect thrones, each one representing perfect power.

The gods are fools because it never occurs to them that not everyone uses paths.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Beneath the battered shield of the sky
The man sits in a black saddle atop a black horse
His hair long and grey drifting out round his iron helm
Knowing nothing of how he came to be here
Only that where he has come to be is nowhere
And where he must go is perhaps near
His beard is the hue of dirty snow
His eyes are eyes that will never thaw

Beneath him the horse does not breathe
Nor does the man and the wind moans hollow
Along the dents of his rusty scaled hauberk
And it is too much to shift about to the approach
Of riders one from his right the other from his left
On dead horses with empty eyes they rein in
Settle silent with strange familiarity
Flanking easy his natural command

Beneath these three the ground is lifeless
And within each ashes are stirred in the dirge
Of grim recollections that slide seeping into regret
But all is past and the horses do not move
And so he glances rightward with jaw clenching
Upon the one-eyed regard he once knew though not well
Answering the wry smile with sudden need
So he asks, 'Are they waiting, Corporal?'

'Bequeathed and loose on the dead plain, Sergeant,
And was this not what you wanted?'
To that he can but shrug and set gaze upon the other
'I see your garb and know you, sir, yet do not.'
Black beard and visage dark, a brow like cracked basalt

A man heavy in armour few could stand in
And he meets the observance with a grimace
'Then know, if you will, Brukhalian of the Grey Swords.'

Beneath these three thunder rides the unproven earth
Nothing sudden but growing like an awakening heart
And the echoes roll down from the shield overhead
As iron reverberates the charge of what must be
'So once more, the Bridgeburners march to war.'
To which Brukhalian adds, 'Too the Grey Swords who fell
And this you call Corporal was reborn only to die,
A new bridge forged between you and me, good sir.'

They turn then on their unbreathing mounts
To review the ranks arrayed in grainy mass on the plain
Onward to war from where and what they had once been
When all that was known is all that one knows again
And in this place the heather never blooms
The blood to be spilled never spills and never flows
Iskar Jarak, Bird That Steals, sits astride a black horse
And looks to command once more

*Sword and Shield*
Fisher kel Tath

Bliss on a sun-warmed sandy beach, on a remote island, proves tedious to souls habituated to stimulation and excitement. The smaller the island, the faster the scene palls. So Gruntle concluded after completing his thirtieth circle round the white rim of the shore, finding himself fascinated by his own footprints, especially when a new set arrived to track his path. Dulled and insensate as he had become, it was a moment before it occurred to him to halt and turn round, to see the one who now followed.

Master Quell was sweating, gasping, fighting through the soft sand as he probably fought through all of life, one wheezing step at a time. He was sunburned on one side of his body, face and neck, bared forearm, ankle and foot, the result of falling asleep in an unwise position. That he had been pursuing Gruntle for some time was clear in that his footprints completed an entire circumambulation, leaving Gruntle to wonder why the man had not simply called out to capture his attention. Indeed, if Gruntle had not noticed the new trail upon his own, they might well have gone round all day, one pursuing, the other simply walking at a pace the pursuer could not achieve.

'A simple shout,' he said as the man drew closer.

'I did not, uh, want, uh, to call undue attention, uh, upon us.'

'You do not sound well.'

'I need to pee.'

'Then—'

'I can't. Well, I can, but intermittently. Generally when I'm not, er, thinking about it.'

'Ah. A healer could—'

'Yes, yes, I know. Never mind that. Listen—'

'Master Quell,' said Gruntle, 'this was not the way to avoid undue attention – everyone else is sitting right there in the shade of the carriage, and they have been watching us for some time. Me, at least. Why, the Bole brothers wave to me with every pass I make.'

They both glanced over and, sure enough, Jula and Amby waved.

Master Quell rubbed at his bicolour red and pasty face. 'I need an escort.'

'For what? To where?'

'Back to the realm of the dead. No, not in the carriage. Just you and me, Gruntle. I need to get a sense of what's going on. We need to just, er, slip in. A quick look round, then back out.'

'And then?'

Quell's brows lifted. 'Then? Well, we resume our journey, of course.'

'You want me to escort you into Hood's realm, as what, your bodyguard?'

The man bristled slightly. 'The shareholder agreement you have made with the Guild includes discretionary tasks as assigned by the Pilot.'

Gruntle shrugged. 'I was but wondering, Master Quell, what possible use I could be, given that the realm is awash with rabid masses of miserable corpses.'

'I said we'd go in quiet!' 'We could ask the passenger we picked up back there.'

'What? Oh, is he still here?'

'Under the palm trees.'

'Under them? Only a dead man could be so stupid. Fine, let's see what we can find out – but I still need to see some things for myself.'

The rest of the crew, along with Mappo, watched them walk over to the twin palm trees, edging into their shade to stand – nervously – before the gaunt, withered undead who was piling up coconuts into pyramids like catapult ammunition. Even as he worked, unmindful of his new guests, another nut thumped heavily on the sand nearby, making both Gruntle and Quell flinch.

'You,' said Quell.

The ghastly face peered up with shrunken eyes. 'Do you like these? Patterns. I like patterns.'

'Happy for you,' Quell muttered. 'How long have you been dead?'

'How long is a taproot?'

'What? Well, show it to me and I'll guess.'

'It's three times the length of the above ground stalk. In the baraka shrub, anyway. Does the ratio hold for other plants? Should we find out?'

'No. Later, I mean. Look, you were marching with all the rest in Hood's realm. Why? Where were you all going? Or coming from? Was it Hood himself who summoned you? Does he command all the dead now?'

'Hood never commands.'

'That's what I thought, but—'

'Yet now he has.'

Quell's eyes widened. 'He has?'

'How wide is the sky? How deep is the ocean? I think about these things, all the time.'

Gruntle noted the Master gaping, like a beached fish, and so he asked, 'What was your name when you were alive, sir?'

'My name? I don't recall. Being alive, I mean. But I must have been, once. My name is Cartographer.'

'That sounds more like a profession.'

The corpse scratched his forehead, flakes of skin fluttering down. 'It does. An extraordinary coincidence. What were my parents thinking?'

'Perhaps you are but confused. Perhaps you were a cartographer, trained in the making of maps and such.'

'Then it was wise that they named me so, wasn't it? Clever parents.'

'What did Hood command of you, Cartographer?'

'Well, he said "Come" and nothing more. It wasn't a command to create confusion, or arguments regarding interpretation. A simple command. Even dogs understand it, I believe. Dogs and sharks. I have found seventeen species of shellfish on this beach. Proof that the world is round.'

Another nut thudded in the sand.

'We are perturbing this island with our presence,' said the cartographer. 'The trees are so angry they're trying to kill us. Of course, I am already dead.' He climbed to his feet, bits falling away here and there, and brushed sand and skin from his hands. 'Can we go now?'

'Yes,' said Master Quell, though his eyes were still a little wild. 'We're going back to Hood's realm and we're happy to take you with us.'

'Oh, no, I'm not going back there. It's not time.'

'Yes it is and yes you are,' said Master Quell.

'No it isn't and no I'm not. Hood issued a second command, one just to me. He said "Go" and so I did. It's not time. Until it is, I'm staying with you.'

'Everyone who rides the carriage,' Quell said in a growl, 'has to work for the privilege.'

'Yes, and I have begun.' And he gestured down at the coconut pyramids. 'You have netting bundled to the sides of the carriage, presumably to hold people on board. If we are to cross water, then we should place these nuts within said netting. As flotation devices, in case someone is washed overboard.' He made a heaving motion with his emaciated arms. 'With a line attached for retrieval.'

'That might work,' said Gruntle.

'Gods below,' Master Quell muttered. 'Fine, I'm not arguing with a dead man. Gruntle, draw your weapons. We're going now.'

'My weapons?'

'Just in case. And now, no more damned talking back!'

Quell fashioned a portal into Hood's warren that was but a thin, elongated slice, like a parting of curtains, from which cool lifeless breath gusted out, sweeping the sand into the air. Eyes stinging, Gruntle glanced back just before following the mage into the rent. And saw Amby and Jula wave.

They emerged on the summit of a hill, one of a long spine of hills, each one so similar to the next that they might be enormous barrows – although why there would be barrows in the realm of death Gruntle could not imagine.

In the valley before them the broad basin was a solid river of grey figures, tens of thousands on the march. Ragged pennons hung from standards as if impervious to the moaning wind. Weapons glinted in muted flashes.

'Gods below,' muttered Quell. 'He's assembling the entire host.'

'Looks that way,' agreed Gruntle, feeling like an idiot with his cutlasses in his hands. He slid them back into the under-slung scabbards. 'Do we make our way down?'

'I'd rather not.'

'Good. Seen enough? Can we go now, Master Quell?'

'Look, a rider approaches.'

The horse was clearly as dead as the man who rode it, gaunt and withered, mottled where hair had worn off. Both wore armour, boiled leather tarnished and cracked, flapping on frayed leather thongs as they climbed the slope. A ragged cape lifted like a tattered wing behind the warrior. As they drew closer, Gruntle swore under his breath. 'He's wearing a mask – he's a damned Seguleh!' And he reached for his weapons—

'Gods' breath, Gruntle, don't do that!'

It was a struggle to lower his arms. Gruntle's blood felt hot as fire in his veins – the beast within him wanted to awaken, to show hackles lifted and fangs bared. The beast wanted to challenge this . . . *thing*. Trembling, he made no move as the rider drove his horse over the crest a dozen paces to their right, sawing the reins and wheeling the beast round to face them.

'Now this is living!' the Seguleh roared, tilting his head back to loose a manic laugh. Then he leaned forward on the saddle and cocked his head, long filthy hair swinging like ropes. 'Well,' he amended in an amused rumble, 'not quite. But close enough. Close enough. Tell me, mortals, do you like my army? I do. Did you know the one thing a commander must battle against – more than any enemy across the plain, more than any personal crisis of will or confidence, more than unkind weather, broken supply chains, plague and all the rest? Do you know what a commander wages eternal war with, my friends? I will tell you. The true enemy is *fear*. The fear that haunts every soldier, that haunts even the beasts they ride.' He lifted a gauntleted hand and waved to the valley below. 'But not with *this* army! Oh, no. Fear belongs to the living, after all.'

'As with the T'lan Imass,' said Gruntle.

The darkness within the mask's elongated eye-holes seemed to glitter as the Seguleh fixed his attention on Gruntle. 'Trake's cub. Now, wouldn't you like to cross blades with me?' A low laugh. 'Yes, as with the T'lan Imass. Is it any wonder the Jaghut recoiled?'

Master Quell cleared his throat. 'Sir,' he said, 'what need has Hood for an army? Will he now wage war against the living?'

'If only,' the Seguleh replied in a grunt. 'You don't belong here – and if you drag that infernal carriage of yours back here any time soon, I will seek you out myself. And then Trake's spitting kitten here can fulfil his desperate desire, hah!' He twisted in his saddle. Other riders were approaching. 'Look at them. My watchdogs. "Be reasonable", indeed. Have I chopped these two interlopers to pieces? I have not. Restraint has been shown.' He faced Gruntle and Quell once more. 'You will confirm this, yes?'

'Beyond you goading Gruntle here,' Quell said, 'yes, I suppose we can.'

'It was a jest!' the Seguleh shouted.

'It was a threat,' Quell corrected, and Gruntle was impressed by the man's sudden courage.

The Seguleh tilted his head, as if he too was casting new measure upon the mage. 'Oh, trundle your wagon wherever you like, then, see if I care.'

Three riders mounted the summit and, slowing their horses to a walk, drew up to where waited the Seguleh, who now sat slumped like a browbeaten bully.

Gruntle started, took an involuntary step forward. 'Toc Anaster?'

The one-eyed soldier's smile was strained. 'Hello, old friend. I am sorry. There may come a time for this, but it is not now.'

Gruntle edged back, blunted by Toc Anaster's cold – even harsh – tone. 'I – I did not know.'

'It was a messy death. My memories remain all too sharp. Gruntle, deliver this message to your god: *not long now.'*

Gruntle scowled. 'Too cryptic. If you want me to pass on your words, you will have to do better than that.'

Toc Anaster's single eye – terrifying in its lifelessness – shifted away.

'He cannot,' said the middle horseman, and there was something familiar about the face behind the helm's cheekguards. 'I remember you from Capustan. Gruntle, chosen servant of Treach. Your god is confused, but it must choose, and soon.'

Gruntle shrugged. 'There is no point in bringing all this to me. Trake and me, we're not really on speaking terms. I didn't ask for any of this. I don't even want it—'

'Hah!' barked the Seguleh, twisting round to face the middle rider. 'Hear that, Iskar Jarak? Let me kill him!'

*Iskar Jarak? I seem to recall he had a different name. One of those odd ones, common to the Malazan soldiery – what was it now?*

'Save your wrath for Skinner,' Iskar Jarak calmly replied.

'Skinner!' roared the Seguleh, savagely wheeling his horse round. 'Where is he, then? I'd forgotten! Hood, you bastard – you made me forget! Where

is he?' He faced the three riders. 'Does Toc know? Brukhalian, you? Someone tell me where he's hiding!' 'Who knows?' said Iskar Jarak. 'But there is one thing for certain.'

'What?' demanded the Seguleh.

'Skinner is not here on this hill.'

'Bah!' The Seguleh drove spurs into his horse's senseless flanks. The animal surged forward anyway, plunging off the hilltop and raging downslope like an avalanche.

Soft laughter from Brukhalian, and Gruntle saw that even Toc was grinning – though he still would not meet his eyes. That death must have been terrible indeed, as if the world had but one answer, one way of ending things, and whatever lessons could be gleaned from that did not ease the spirit. The notion left him feeling morose.

It was a common curse to feel unclean, but that curse would be unbearable if no cleansing awaited one, if not at the moment of dying, then afterwards. Looking upon these animated corpses, Gruntle saw nothing of redemption, nothing purged – guilt, shame, regrets and grief, they all swirled about these figures like a noxious cloud.

'If getting killed lands me with you lot,' he said, 'I'd rather do without.'

The one named Iskar Jarak leaned wearily over the large Seven Cities saddle horn. 'I sympathize, truly. Tell me, do you think we've all earned our rest?'

'Don't you?'

'You have lost all your followers.'

'I have.' Gruntle saw that Toc Anaster was now watching him, fixed, sharp as a dagger point.

'They are not here.'

He frowned at Iskar Jarak. 'And they should be, I suppose?'

Brukhalian finally spoke, 'It is just that. We are no longer so sure.'

'Stay out of Hood's realm,' said Toc Anaster. 'The gate is . . . closed.'

Master Quell started. 'Closed? But that's ridiculous! Does Hood now turn the dead away?'

Toc's single eye held on Gruntle. 'The borders are sealed to the living. There will be sentinels. Patrols. Intrusions will not be tolerated. Where we march you can't go. Not now, perhaps never. Stay away, until the choice is taken from you. *Stay away.'*

And Gruntle saw then, finally, the anguish that gripped Toc Anaster, the bone-deep fear and dread. He saw how the man's warning was in truth a cry to a friend, from one already lost, already doomed. *Save yourself. Just do that, and it will all be worth it – all we must do, the war we must seek. Damn you, Gruntle, give all this* meaning.

Quell must have sensed something of these fierce undercurrents, for he then bowed to the three riders. 'I shall deliver your message. To all the pilots of the Trygalle Trade Guild.'

The ground seemed to shift uneasily beneath Gruntle's boots.

'And now you had better leave,' said Brukhalian.

The hill groaned – and what Gruntle had imagined as some internal vertigo was now revealed as a real quaking of the earth.

Master Quell's eyes were wide and he held his hands out to the sides to stay balanced.

At the far end of the range of hills, a massive eruption thundered, lifting earth and stones skyward. From the ruptured mound something rose, clawing free, sinuous neck and gaping, snapping jaws, wings spreading wide—

The hill shivered beneath them.

The three riders had wheeled their horses and were now barrelling down the slope.

'Quell!'

'A moment, damn you!'

Another hill exploded.

*Damned barrows all right! Holding dead dragons!* 'Hurry—'

'Be quiet!'

The portal that split open was ragged, edges rippling as if caught in a storm.

The hill to their right burst its flanks. A massive wedge-shaped head scythed in their direction, gleaming bone and shreds of desiccated skin—

*'Quell!'*

'Go! I need to—'

The dragon heaved up from cascading earth, forelimbs tearing into the ground. The leviathan was coming for them.

*No – it's coming for the portal* – Gruntle grasped Master Quell and dragged him towards the rent. The mage struggled, shrieking – but whatever he sought to say was lost in the deafening hiss from the dragon as it lurched forward. The head snapped closer, jaws wide – and Gruntle, with Quell in his arms, threw himself back, plunging into the portal—

They emerged at twice the height of a man above the sandy beach, plummeting downward to thump heavily in a tangle of limbs.

Shouts from the others—

As the undead dragon tore through the rent with a piercing cry of triumph, head, neck, forelimbs and shoulders, then one wing cracked out, spreading wide in an enormous torn sail shedding dirt. The second wing whipped into view—

Master Quell was screaming, weaving frantic words of power, panic driving his voice ever higher.

The monstrosity shivered out like an unholy birth, lunged skyward above the island. Stones rained down in clouds. As the tattered tip of its long tail

slithered free, the rent snapped shut.

Lying half in the water, half on hard-packed sand, Gruntle stared up as the creature winged away, still shedding dust.

Shareholder Faint arrived, falling to her knees beside them. She was glaring at Master Quell who was slowly sitting up, a stunned look on his face.

'You damned fool,' she snarled, 'why didn't you throw a damned harness on that thing? We just lost our way off this damned island!'

Gruntle stared at her. *Insane. They are all insane.*

There was a tension in his stance that she had not seen before. He faced east, across the vast sweeping landscape of the Dwelling Plain. Samar Dev gave the tea another stir then hooked the pot off the coals and set it to one side. She shot Karsa Orlong a look, but the Toblakai was busy retying the leather strings of one of his moccasins, aided in some mysterious way by his tongue which had curled into view from the corner of his mouth – the gesture was so childlike she wondered if he wasn't mocking her, aware as always that she was studying him.

Havok cantered into view from a nearby basin, his dawn hunt at an end. The other horses shifted nervously as the huge beast drew closer with head held high as if to show off the blood glistening on his muzzle.

'We need to find water today,' Samar Dev said, pouring out the tea.

'So we will,' Karsa replied, standing now to test the tightness of the moccasin. Then he reached beneath his trousers to make some adjustments.

'Reminding yourself it's there?' she asked. 'Here's your tea. Don't gulp.'

He took the cup from her. 'I know it's there,' he said. 'I was just reminding *you.'*

'Hood's breath,' she said, and then stopped as Traveller seemed to flinch.

He turned to face them, his eyes clouded, far away. 'Yes,' he said. 'Spitting something out.'

Samar Dev frowned. 'Yes what?'

His gaze cleared, flitted briefly to her and then away again. 'Something is happening,' he said, walking over to pick up the tin cup. He looked down into the brew for a moment, then sipped.

'Something is always happening,' Karsa said easily. 'It's why misery gets no rest. The witch says we need water – we can follow yon valley, at least for a time, since it wends northerly.'

'The river that made it has been dead ten thousand years, Toblakai. But yes, the direction suits us well enough.'

'The valley remembers.'

Samar Dev scowled at Karsa. The warrior was getting more cryptic by the day, as if he was being overtaken by something of this land's ambivalence. For the Dwelling Plain was ill named. Vast stretches of . . . nothing. Animal tracks but no animals. The only birds in the sky were those vultures that daily tracked them, wheeling specks of patience. Yet Havok had found prey.

The Dwelling Plain was a living secret, its language obscure and wont to drift like waves of heat. Even Traveller seemed uneasy with this place.

She drained the last of her tea and rose. 'I believe this land was cursed once, long ago.'

'Curses are immortal,' said Karsa in a dismissive grunt.

'Will you stop that?'

'What? I am telling you what I sense. The curse does not die. It persists.'

Traveller said, 'I do not think it was a curse. What we are feeling is the land's memory.'

'A grim memory, then.'

'Yes, Samar Dev,' agreed Traveller. 'Here, life comes to fail. Beasts too few to breed. Outcasts from villages and cities. Even the caravan tracks seem to wander half lost – none are used with any consistency, because the sources of water are infrequent, elusive.'

'Or they want to keep bandits guessing.'

'I have seen no old camps,' Traveller pointed out. 'There are no bandits here, I think.'

'We need to find water,' Samar said again.

'So you said,' Karsa said, with an infuriating grin.

'Why not clean up the breakfast leavings, Toblakai. Astonish me by being useful.' She walked over to her horse, collecting the saddle on the way. She could draw a dagger, she could let slip some of her lifeblood, could reach down into this dry earth and see what was there to be seen. Or she could keep her back turned, her self closed in. The two notions warred with each other. Curiosity and trepidation.

She swung the saddle on to the horse's broad back, adjusted the girth straps and then waited for the animal to release its held breath. Nothing likes to be bound. Not the living, perhaps not the dead. Once, she might have asked Karsa about that, if only to confirm what she already knew – but he had divested himself of that mass of souls trailing in his wake. Somehow, the day he killed the Emperor. Oh, two remained, there in that horrid sword of his.

And perhaps that was what was different about him, she realized. *Liberation. But then, has he not already begun collecting more?* She cinched the strap then half turned to regard the giant warrior, who was using sand to scrub the blackened pan on which she'd cooked knee-root, challenging the pernicious crust with a belligerent scowl. No, she could sense nothing – not as drawn in as she'd made herself. Thus, sensing nothing didn't mean anything, did it? Perhaps he had grown at ease with those victims dragged behind him everywhere he went.

*A man like that should not smile. Should never smile, or laugh. He should be haunted.*

But he was too damned arrogant to suffer haunting, a detail that invariably irritated her, even as she was drawn to it (and was that not irritating in itself?).

'You chew on him,' said Traveller, who had come unseen to her side and now spoke quietly, 'as a jackal does an antler. Not out of hunger so much as habit. He is not as complicated as you think, Samar Dev.'

'Oh yes he is. More so, in fact.'

The man grimaced as he set about saddling his own horse. 'A child dragged into the adult world, but no strength was lost. No weakening of purpose. He remains young enough,' Traveller said, 'to still be certain. Of his vision, of his beliefs, of the way he thinks the world works.'

'Oh, so precisely when will the world get round to kicking him good and hard between the legs?'

'For some, it never does.'

She eyed him. 'You are saying it does no good to rail against injustice.'

'I am saying do not expect justice, Samar Dev. Not in this world. And not in the one to come.'

'Then what drives you so, Traveller? What forces your every step, ever closer to whatever destiny waits for you?'

He was some time in answering, although she did not deceive herself into thinking that her words had struck something vulnerable. These men here with her, they were armoured in every way. He cinched the girth straps and dropped the stirrups. 'We have an escort, Samar Dev.'

'We do? The vultures?'

'Well, yes, there are those, too. Great Ravens.'

At that she squinted skyward. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, but I was speaking of another escort.'

'Oh, then who? And why doesn't it show itself?'

Traveller swung himself astride his horse and gathered the reins. Karsa had completed packing the camp gear and was now bridling Havok. 'I have

no answers to those questions, Samar Dev. I do not presume to know the minds of Hounds of Shadow.'

She saw Karsa Orlong glance over at that, but there was nothing revealed in his expression beyond simple curiosity.

*Gods, he drives me mad!*

'Do they hunt us?' Karsa asked.

'No,' Traveller replied. 'At least, not me, nor, I imagine, our witch here.'

Karsa mounted his Jhag horse. 'Today,' he announced, 'I shall not ride with you. Instead, I shall find these Hounds of Shadow, for I wish to see them for myself. And if they in turn see me alone, then they may choose to make plain their desires.'

'Now what is the point of that?' demanded Samar Dev.

'I have faced Hounds before,' he said. 'I am happy to invite them close, so they can smell the truth of that.'

'There is no need,' said Traveller. 'Karsa Orlong, the Hounds began as my escort – one in truth – granted me by Shadowthrone. They are not interested in you, I am sure of it.'

Samar Dev rounded on him. 'Then why did you suggest otherwise?'

He met her eyes and she saw him gritting his teeth, the muscles of his jaws binding. 'You were right, witch,' he said, 'you know this warrior better than I.'

Karsa snorted a laugh. 'I will see you later.'

They watched him ride off.

Samar Dev wanted to spit – the tea had left her mouth dry, bitter. 'He probably will at that,' she muttered, 'whether the Hounds like it or not.'

Traveller simply nodded.

Skintick knew precisely the day he died. The final terrible battle waged on Drift Avalii, with four of his closest companions falling, each just beyond

his reach, beyond his own life which he would have sacrificed to take their place. And into the midst of the crumbling defence, Andarist had stepped forward, making of himself a lodestone to the attacking Tiste Edur.

The death of the man whom Skintick thought of as his father remained in his mind, like a scene painted by some chronicler of abject, pathetic moments. And in that sad, regretful face, he had seen all the kin who had fallen before, killed for no cause worth thinking about – or so it seemed at the time. The grey-skinned barbarians desired the throne – perhaps they were collecting such things, as if possession conferred a right, but what did it matter? These games were stupidity, every trophy an absurd icon symbolizing precisely nothing beyond the raging ego of the players.

Honourable souls had died for this, and, once the grief washed away, what was left but this building contempt for all of it? Defending this, fighting for that, winning in one moment only to lose in the next. Raw magic blistering flesh, javelins winging to thud into bodies, everything of value spilling out on to dusty cobbles and the ribbons of grass growing exuberant between them.

The things that died in him on that day would be deemed virtues by most. Duty had revealed its lie, shattering the sanctity of loyalty and honour. They'd fought for nothing. They could have retreated, holed up at the decrepit temple entrance, and simply waited for the arrival of the humans, first the assassins and then the one named Traveller and his followers. Traveller, who murdered everyone foolish enough to step into his path. Whose arrival made Andarist's death – and the deaths of his friends – meaningless.

How Skintick hated that man. Competence was no gift when it arrived too late.

He no longer believed in honesty either. To be told the truth was to feel the shackles snap shut on one's ankle. Truth was delivered with the expectation that it would force a single course of action – after all, how could one honourably turn away? Truth was used as a weapon, and all one could do in defence against such an assault was to throw up a wall of lies. Lies of acceptance, capitulation. Lies to oneself, too. That things mattered.

That ideas had currency and symbols deserved the servitude of courageous fools. And that it all had meaning.

Nor was he a believer in courage. People relied on the bravery of others to reap whatever profits they imagined they had earned or deserved, but the blood spilled was never theirs, was it? No, it was clear now to Skintick. Virtues were lauded to ensure compliance, to wrap round raw, reprehensible servitude. To proclaim the sacrifice of others – each of whom stood in place of those reaping the rewards and so were paid in suffering and pain.

So much for the majesty of patriotism.

He was having none of it, not any more, never again. And this was what made him dead now. And as with anyone for whom nothing matters, he now found much of what he saw around him profoundly amusing. Snide commentary, derisive regard and an eye for the horror of true irony, these were the things he would now pursue.

Did Anomander Rake grieve for his dead brother? For Andarist, who had stood in his place? Did he spare a thought for his wretched spawn, so many of whom were now dead? Or was he now lolling fat and dissolute on whatever mockery he called his throne, reaping all the rewards of his brother's final sacrifice? *And that of my cousins? My closest friends, who each died to defend a possession so valuable to you that it rots in an empty temple? Remind me to ask you that question when we finally meet.*

Though he loved Nimander – indeed, loved them all in this pathetic band (save Clip, of course) – Skintick could not help but observe with silent hilarity the desperate expectations of this journey's fated end. They all sought safety and, no doubt, a pat on the head for services rendered. They all wanted to be told that their sacrifices had meaning, value, were worthy of pride. And Skintick knew that he alone would be able to see the disdain veiled in the eyes of the Son of Darkness, even as he spouted all the necessary platitudes, before sending them off to their small rooms in some forgotten wing of whatever palace Rake now occupied.

*And then what, my dearest kin? Shunted out on to the streets to wander in the dusk, as the presence of others slowly prises our band apart, until all we*

*once were becomes memories thick with dust, barely worthy of the occasional reminiscence, some annual gathering in some tavern with a leaking roof, where we will see how we each have sagged with the years, and we'll get drunk swapping tales we all know by heart, even as the edges grow blunt and all the colours bleed out.*

*Desra lying on her back, her legs spread wide, but the numbness inside can't be pierced that way and she probably knows but habits never die, they just wear disguises. Nenanda will polish his weapons and armour every morning – we'll see him clanking round guarding everything and nothing, his eyes mottled with verdigris and rust. Aranatha sits in an overgrown garden, mesmerized for ten years and counting by a lone blossom beneath a tree; do we not envy the bliss in her empty eyes? Kedeviss? Well, she will chronicle our despair, our sordid demise. Rounding us up for the night in the tavern will be her one task with any meaning – at least to her – and she will silently rail at our turgid, insipid uninterest.*

*Nimander, ah, Nimander, what waits for you? One night, your vision will clear. One deadly, devastating night. You will see the blood on your hands, dear vicious Phaed's blood. And that of so many others, since you were the one we victimized by proclaiming you as our leader. And on that night, my friend, you will see that it was all for naught, and you will take your own life. A tower, a window ledge and a plummet down through the dark to achieve the incumbent poetic futility.*

Skintick could not find himself in that future. He did not expect to complete this journey. He was not sure he even wanted to. The same chronicler who painted past scenes would paint the future ones, too. The same damned theme, reworked with all the obsessiveness of a visionary throttling the blind.

One thing was certain. He would permit no one ever again to abuse his virtues – even those few that remained, in their dishevelled state. They were not currency, not things to be measured, weighed against gold, gems, property or power. If the bastards wanted all that, they could sweat their own sweat and bleed their own blood to get it.

*Take me as a knife and I will turn in your hand. I swear it.*

'You are smiling,' Nimander observed. 'It pleases me to see that alive and well.'

Skintick glanced at him. The legacy of Bastion remained in the stains of old blood beneath the salt that now caked moccasins and leggings. No one had bothered cleaning their gear, so desperate was the need to leave that city.

Something had changed in Nimander, however, beyond the horrors of saemankelyk and the Dying God's altar. As if his sense of purpose had taken a fresh beating, like a new seedling trampled underfoot. How many times, Skintick wondered, could Nimander suffer that, before some fundamental poison altered his very nature? The vision he had of Nimander's final demise was dependent upon a certain sanctity of spirit remaining, something precious and rare that would drive him to that last act of despair. If it was already dead, or twisted malign, then Nimander's fate would become truly unknown.

*Has he found ambition? Is the poison of cynicism awakening in his beleaguered soul?* This could change things, Skintick realized. *He might become someone I could choose to follow – yes, down that nasty path and why not? Let someone else suffer for our gains, for a change. Topple them into the dirt and see how they like the sweet reversal.*

*Is he hard enough to play that game?*

*Am I hard enough to make use of him?*

They had found a horse for Clip, but retained the wagon, at least for this journey northward along the edge of the dying salt lake. Nenanda was seated once more on the raised bench, reins in one hand, switch in the other. Aranatha sat with her legs dangling off the end of the wagon, eyes on the row of broken teeth that was Bastion's dwindling skyline, hazy and shimmering above the heat waves. Desra lounged in the wagon's bed, dozing among the casks of water and bundles of dried goods. Kedeviss rode flank off to the right, almost thirty paces away now, her horse picking its way along the old beach with its withered driftwood.

Clip rode far ahead, emphasizing his impatience. He'd not been much interested in hearing the tale of their doings since his collapse at the village – a failing on his part (as he evidently saw the suggestion) that he refused to entertain, although this clearly left a mysterious and no doubt troubling gap in his memory. He was, if anything, even more evasive than he had been before, and more than once Skintick had caught suspicion in the warrior's eyes when observing the rest of them. As if they had conspired to steal something from him, and had succeeded.

Skintick's distrust of the bastard was growing. It wasn't hard to hate Clip – absurdly easy, in fact – and such sentiments could well cloud his sense of the warrior with his endlessly spinning rings. Clip was, he now believed, one of those eager to abuse the virtues of others to achieve whatever private and entirely personal victory he sought. And if the effort left a half-dozen contemptible youths dead in his wake, what of it?

He could not but see the bloodstains they now wore; could not but have noticed the notched and nicked weapons they took files to during rest stops. Their damaged armour. And dazed and groggy as he had been upon awakening in the altar chamber, he could not have been blind to the scores of dead – the veritable slaughterhouse they had left behind. And yet still Clip saw them as barely worth his regard, beyond that malicious suspicion as it slowly flowered into paranoia, and what might that lead him to do?

*To us?*

*Yes, one more fear to stalk me now, though I am dead.*

'We will need to find a way through those mountains,' Nimander said, squinting ahead.

'God's Walk, Clip called them. An astounding fount of unexpected knowledge, our grateful friend.'

'Grateful? Ah, I see. Well, he wasn't there in spirit, was he?'

'No, too busy dancing from the spider's bite.'

'It does little good to try describing what happened,' Nimander said. 'To one who remains closed, words are thinner than webs, easily swept aside.'

'We should have lied.'

Nimander looked over, brows lifting.

Skintick grinned. 'Some wild tale of godly possession and insane fanatics eager to splash the world with their own blood. Us stumbling on to a path to paradise only to find we're not welcome. Double-crossing a simpleton god who misunderstood the notion of puppets – that they be made of followers, not himself. A tale of poisoned wine that was blood that was wine that was blood. Oh, and let's not forget our glorious slaughter, that improbable collection of lucky swings and pokes and the infernal bad luck of our attackers. And then—'

'Enough, Skin, please.'

'Why did we bother, Nimander? Bother saving him?'

Nimander's eyes remained on the distant mountains.

'Aranatha says he is needed. Necessary.'

'For what? And what would she know about it anyway?'

'I wish I could answer those questions, Skin.'

'I feel as if I am drowning in blood.'

Nimander nodded. 'Yes. I feel the same. I think we all do.'

'I don't think Anomander Rake has it in him to throw us a rope.'

'Probably not.'

This admission, so wise, shook Skintick. His fear was accurate – their leader had changed. *Does he even now see clearly? Yet, if that is so, where is his despair? I do not understand—*

'It feels like,' Nimander said, 'dying inside. That's what it feels like.'

'Don't say that, brother. Don't.'

'Why not?'

*Only one of us can feel that way. Only one. I got there first, damn you! It's mine!* Abruptly, he barked a laugh. 'No reason, in truth. No reason at all.'

'You are acting strangely, Skin, did you know that?'

He shrugged. 'We need to wash this blood off, Nimander.'

They rode on across the bleached salt flat. The day grew hotter.

Directly beneath the floor of the *terondai*, where blazed the black sun, a vast chamber had been carved out of the bedrock. When Anomander Rake, Lord of Black Coral and Son of Darkness, wearied of the view from the keep's tower and other high vantage points, he descended into this womb in the rock, where darkness remained absolute.

Such moments were rare, and even rarer that the Lord should summon Endest Silann to meet him in the subterranean cavern. His legs still stiff from the long trek back to the city, the castellan made his way down the steep, winding stairs, until at last he reached the base. Enormous doors sealed the cave, scaled in beaten silver in patterns suggesting the skin of dragons. Tarnished black, barring the gleam of the scales' edges, the barrier was barely visible to Endest Silann's failing eyes, and when he reached for the heavy latch he was forced to grope for a moment before his hand settled on the silver bar.

Cold air gusted around him as he pulled one of the doors open. A smell of raw stone, acrid and damp, the sound of trickling water. He saw his Lord standing near the centre, where an obelisk rose like a stalagmite from the floor. This basalt edifice was carved square at the base, tapering to an apex at twice the height of a Tiste Andii. On the side facing Rake there was an indent, moulded to match the sword he carried on his back.

'It is not often,' said Anomander as Endest approached, 'that I feel the need to ease the burden of Dragnipur.'

'Sire.'

He watched as Anomander unsheathed the dread sword and set it into the indentation. At once the obelisk began sweating, thick, glistening beads

studding the smoothed surface, then racing down the sides. Something like thunder groaned through the stone underfoot.

Endest Silann sighed, leaned on his walking stick. 'The stone, Lord, cannot long withstand that burden.' *Yet you can, and this so few understand, so few comprehend at all.*

'A few moments more,' Anomander Rake murmured.

'Sire, that was not a chastisement.'

A brief smile. 'But it was, old friend, and a wise one.

Stone knows its own weight, and the limits of what it can sustain. Be assured, I will not long abuse its generosity.'

Endest Silann looked round, drawing in the sweet darkness, so pure, so perfect. *It is almost as we once knew. Kharkanas, before she embraced Light, before the ones born of ashes lifted themselves up and took swords in hand. Scabandari. Ilgast Rend, Halyd Bahann. Esthala who dreamed of peace. Kagamandra Tulas Shorn, who did not.*

'I have sent Spinnock Durav away.'

'Yes, I heard. Sire, I cannot—'

'I am afraid you have no choice, Endest.'

'The High Priestess—'

'Understands, and she will do all she can.'

*So long ago now. Lord, your patience beggars that of gods.*

'There was no purpose worthy enough to breathe life into our people, was there? It is not history that so assailed us, although many see it that way. The lessons of futility can be gathered by anyone with a mind so inclined. Every triumph hollow, every glory revealed at last to be ephemeral. But none of that gives cause to wither the spirit. Damage it, perhaps, yes, but the road we have walked down stands high above such things. Do you understand that, Endest?'

'I think I do, sire.'

'We were murdered by compromises. No, not those that followed the arrival of Light. Not those born of Shadow. These things were inevitable. They were, by their very nature, *necessary.'*

'Yes.'

'The day we accepted her turning away, Endest, was the day we ran the knives across our own throats.' Anomander Rake paused, and then said, 'We are an ancient, stubborn people.' He faced Endest Silann. 'See how long it has taken to bleed out?'

*And then, to complete the unruly triumvirate, there was the brood of Osserc. Menandore, and that mess of mixed bloods to follow: Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu, Brevith Dreda. The others, the ones outside all of that, how they watched on, bemused, brows darkening with anger. Draconus, you thought you could give answer to all of us. You were wrong.*

*Were you wrong?* He found himself staring at Dragnipur, catching the faintest echo of rumbling wheels, the muted cries of the suffering, and there, yes, that seething storm of chaos drawing ever closer.

'Without the blood of dragons,' Anomander Rake went on, 'we would all be dust, scattered on the winds, drifting between the stars themselves. Yes, others might see it differently, but that cold fever, so sudden in our veins, so fierce in our minds – the chaos, Endest – gave us the strength to persist, to cease fearing change, to accept all that was unknown and unknowable. And this is why you chose to follow us, each in our time, our place.'

*The chaos in you, yes, a fire on the promontory, a beacon piercing the profound entropy we saw all around us. And yet, so few of you proved worthy of our allegiance. So few, Lord, and fewer with each generation, until now here you stand, virtually alone.*

Tears were streaming from his eyes now, weeping as did the obelisk, as did the stone on all sides. *The one who was worth it. The only one.*

'You will find the strength within you, Endest Silann. Of that I have no doubt.'

'Yes, sire.'

'As shall I.' And with that the Son of Darkness reached out, reclaimed the sword Dragnipur. With familiar ease he slid the weapon into the scabbard on his back. He faced Endest and smiled as if the burden he had just accepted yet again could not drive others to their knees – gods, ascendants, the proud and the arrogant, all to their knees. Rake's legs did not buckle, did not even so much as tremble. He stood tall, unbowed, and in the smile he offered Endest Silann there was a certainty of purpose, so silent, so indomitable, so utterly appalling that Endest felt his heart clench, as if moments from rupturing.

And his Lord stepped close then, and with one hand brushed the wetness from one cheek.

He could see her dancing out there, amidst dust devils and shards of frost-skinned rock, through shafts of blistering sunlight and hazy swirls of spinning snow. Blood still streamed from his wounds and it seemed that would never cease – that this crimson flow debouched from some eternal river, and the blood was no longer his own, but that of the god standing beside him. It was an odd notion, yet it felt truthful even though he dared not ask the Redeemer, dared not hear the confirmation from the god's mouth.

The crazed weather whirled on out on that plain, and she moved through it effortlessly, round and round, this way and that, but not yet drawing closer, not yet coming for him once more.

'Why does she wait?' he asked. 'She must see that I cannot withstand another assault, that I will surely fall.'

'She would if she could,' the Redeemer replied.

'What holds her back?'

'Wounds must heal, memories of pain fade.'

Seerdomin rubbed at the grit on his face. There had been dirty rain, gusting up to where they stood, but it had since wandered back down into the basin, a rotted brown curtain dragged aimlessly away.

'Sometimes,' said the Redeemer, 'things leak through.'

Seerdomin grunted, then asked, 'From where?'

'Lives of the T'lan. So much was unleashed, so much forgotten only to be lived once again. There was anguish. There was . . . glory.'

He had not been there to witness that moment. The kneeling of the T'lan Imass. Such a thing was hard to imagine, yet it sent shivers through him none the less. A moment to shake every belief, when the world drew breath and . . . *held it*.

'Did you know what to expect?'

'They humbled me,' said the Redeemer.

*I suspect it was you who humbled them, Itkovian – yes, a mortal back then, just a mortal. No, they were the ones struck mute, filled with awe and wonder. I do not know how I know that, but I do.*

*. . . things leak through.*

'The madness of the weather comes from the memories of the T'lan Imass? Can you not summon them? Draw them up in ranks before you? Do you not think they would proudly accept such a thing? A way to pay you back for what you did? Redeemer, summon the spirits of the T'lan Imass – and that woman below will never reach you.'

'I cannot. I will not. Yes, they would accept that notion. Reciprocity. But I will not. What I gave I gave freely, a gift, not an exchange. Oh, they forced one upon me, at the end, but it was modest enough – or I was weak enough then not to resist it.'

'If you will not accept service,' Seerdomin then said, 'why do you seek it from me?'

'You are free to choose,' the Redeemer replied. 'Defend me, or step aside and see me fall.'

'That's hardly a choice!'

'True. Such things rarely are. I would send you back, but your body no longer functions. It lies on a heap of rubbish behind the pilgrim camp. Scavengers have fed, for your flesh is not poisoned as is that of the others thus disposed.'

Seerdomin grimaced, fixing eyes once more upon the High Priestess dancing on the plain. 'Thank you for the grisly details. If I stand aside – if I watch you die – then what will happen to me? To my spirit?'

'I do not know. If I am able, I will grieve for you then, as much as I do for the souls of all those I now hold within me.'

Seerdomin slowly turned and studied the god. 'If she takes you – all those T'lan Imass—'

'Will be helpless. They will succumb. All who are within me will succumb.'

'So much for standing aside.'

'Seerdomin. Segda Travos, you are not responsible for their fate. I am. This error is mine. I will not judge you harshly should you choose to yield.'

'Error. What error?'

'I am . . . defenceless. You sensed that from the very beginning – when you came to the barrow and there knelt, honouring me with your companionship. I possess no provision for judgement. My embrace is refused no one.'

'Then change that, damn you!'

'I am trying.'

Seerdomin glared at the god, who now offered a faint smile. After a moment, Seerdomin hissed and stepped back. 'You ask this of *me*? Are you mad? I am not one of your pilgrims! Not one of your mob of would-be priests and priestesses! *I do not worship you!'*

'Precisely, Segda Travos. It is the curse of believers that they seek to second-guess the one they claim to worship.'

'In your silence what choice do they have?'

The Redeemer's smile broadened. 'Every choice in the world, my friend.'

Countless paths, a single place sought by all. If she could be bothered, she could think on the innumerable generations – all that rose to stand with thoughts reaching into the night sky, or plunging into the mesmerizing flames of the campfire – the hunger did not change. The soul lunged, the soul crawled, the soul scraped and dragged and pitched headlong, and in the place it desired – *needed* – there was this: the bliss of certainty.

Conviction like armour, eyes shining like swords; oh, the bright glory that was the end to every question, every doubt. Shadows vanished, the world raged sudden white and black. Evil dripped with slime and the virtuous stood tall as giants. Compassion could be partitioned, meted out only to the truly deserving – the innocent and the blessed. As for all the rest, they could burn, for they deserved no less.

She danced like truth unleashed. The beauty of simplicity flowed pure and sweet through her limbs, rode the ebb and sweep of her sighing breath. All those agonizing uncertainties were gone, every doubt obliterated by the gift of saemankelyk.

She had found the shape of the world, every edge clear and sharp and undeniable. Her thoughts could dance through it almost effortlessly, evading snags and tears, not once touching raw surfaces that might scrape, that might make her flinch.

The bliss of certainty delivered another gift. She saw before her a universe transformed, one where contradictions could be rightfully ignored, where hypocrisy did not exist, where to serve the truth in oneself permitted easy denial of anything that did not fit.

The minuscule mote of awareness that hid within her, like a snail flinching into its shell, was able to give shape to this transformation, well recognizing it as genuine revelation, the thing she had been seeking all along – yet in the wrong place.

Salind understood now that the Redeemer was a child god, innocent, yes, but not in a good way. The Redeemer possessed no certainty in himself. He was not all-seeing, but blind. From a distance the two might appear identical, there in that wide embrace, the waiting arms, the undefended openness. He forgave all because he could not see *difference*, could not even sense who was deserving and who was not.

Saemankelyk brought an end to ambiguity. It divided the world cleanly, absolutely.

She must give that to him. It would be her gift – the greatest gift imaginable – to her beloved god. An end to his ambivalence, his ignorance, his helplessness.

Soon, the time would come when she would once again seek him. The pathetic mortal soul standing in her way would not frustrate her the next time she found her weapons – no, her righteous blades would cut and slash him to pieces.

The thought made her fling her arms into the air as she whirled. *Such joy!* She had a gift. It was her duty to deliver it.

*Whether you like it or not.*

No, he could not refuse. If he did, why, she would have to kill him.

*

Bone white, the enormous beasts stood on the ridge, side on, their heads turned to watch Karsa Orlong as he cantered Havok ever closer. He sensed his horse tensing beneath him, saw the ears flick a moment before he became aware that he was being flanked by more Hounds – these ones darker, heavier, short-haired excepting one that reminded him of the wolves of his homeland, that tracked him with amber eyes.

'So,' Karsa murmured, 'these are the Hounds of Shadow. You would play games with me, then? Try for me, and when we're done few of you will leave this place, and none will be free of wounds, this I promise you. Havok, see the black one in the high grasses? Thinks to hide from us.' He

grunted a laugh. 'The others will feint, but that black one will lead the true charge. My sword shall tap *her* nose first.'

The two white beasts parted, one trotting a dozen or so paces along the ridge, the other turning round and doing the same in the opposite direction. In the gap now between them, shadows swirled like a dust-devil.

Karsa could feel a surge of battle lust within him, his skin prickling beneath the fixed attention of seven savage beasts, yet he held his gaze on that smudge of gloom, where two figures were now visible. Men, one bare-headed and the other hooded and leaning crooked over a knobby cane.

The Hounds to either side maintained their distance, close enough for a swift charge but not so close as to drive Havok into a rage. Karsa reined in six paces from the strangers and eyed them speculatively.

The bare-headed one was plainly featured, pale as if unfamiliar with sunlight, his dark hair straight and loose, almost ragged. His eyes shifted colour in the sunlight, blue to grey, to green and perhaps even brown, a cascade of indecision that matched his expression as he in turn studied the Toblakai.

The first gesture came from the hooded one with the hidden face, a lifting of the cane in a half-hearted waver. 'Nice horse,' he said.

'Easier to ride than a dog,' Karsa replied.

A snort from the dark-haired man.

'This one,' said the hooded man, 'resists sorcery, Cotillion. Though his blood is old, I wonder, will all mortals one day be like him? An end to miracles. Nothing but dull, banal existence, nothing but mundane absence of wonder.' The cane jabbed. 'A world of bureaucrats. Mealy-minded, sour-faced and miserable as a reunion of clerks. In such a world, Cotillion, not even the gods will visit. Except in pilgrimage to depression.'

'Quaintly philosophical of you, Shadowthrone,' replied the one named Cotillion. 'But is this one really the right audience? I can almost smell the bear grease from here.'

'That's Lock,' said Shadowthrone. 'He was rolling in something a while ago.'

Karsa leaned forward on the strange saddle that Samar Dev had had fitted for Havok back in Letheras. 'If I am a clerk, then one prophecy will prove true.'

'Oh, and which one would that be?' Cotillion asked, seemingly amused that Karsa was capable of speech.

'The tyranny of the number counters will be a bloody one.'

Shadowthrone wheezed laughter, then coughed into the silence of the others and said, 'Hmmm.'

Cotillion's eyes had narrowed. 'In Darujhistan, a temple awaits you, Toblakai. A crown and a throne for the taking.'

Karsa scowled. 'Not more of that shit. I told the Crippled God I wasn't interested. I'm still not. My destiny belongs to me and none other.'

'Oh,' said Shadowthrone, cane wavering about once again, like a headless snake, 'we're not encouraging you to take it. Far from it. You on that throne would be . . . distressing. But he will drive you, Toblakai, the way hunters drive a man-eating lion. Straight into the spike-filled pit.'

'A smart lion knows when to turn,' Karsa said. 'Watch as the hunters scatter.'

'It is because we understand you, Toblakai, that we do not set the Hounds upon you. You bear your destiny like a standard, a grisly one, true, but then, its only distinction is in being obvious. Did you know that we too left civilization behind? The scribblers were closing in on all sides, you see. The clerks with their purple tongues and darting eyes, their shuffling feet and sloped shoulders, their bloodless lists. Oh, measure it all out! Acceptable levels of misery and suffering!' The cane swung down, thumped hard on the ground. *'Acceptable?* Who the fuck says *any* level is acceptable? What sort of mind thinks that?'

Karsa grinned. 'Why, a civilized one.'

'Indeed!' Shadowthrone turned to Cotillion. 'And you doubted this one!'

Cotillion grimaced. 'I stand corrected, Shadowthrone. If the Crippled God has not yet learned his lesson with this warrior, more lessons are bound to follow. We can leave him to them. And leave this Toblakai, too.'

'Barring one detail,' Shadowthrone said in a rasp. 'Toblakai, heed this warning, if you value that destiny you would seek for yourself. Do not stand in Traveller's path. *Ever.'*

Karsa's grin broadened. 'We are agreed, he and I.'

'You are?'

'I will not stand in his path, and he will not stand in mine.'

Shadowthrone and Cotillion were silent then, considering.

Leaning back, Karsa collected the lone rein. Havok lifted his head, nostrils flaring. 'I killed two Deragoth,' Karsa said.

'We know,' said Cotillion.

'Their arrogance was their soft underbelly. Easy to reach. Easy to plunge in my hands. I killed them because they thought me weak.'

Cotillion's expression grew mocking. 'Speaking of arrogance . . .'

'I was speaking,' said Karsa as he swung Havok round, 'of lessons.' Then he twisted in the saddle. 'You laugh at those coming to the Crippled God. Perhaps one day I will laugh at those coming to you.'

Cotillion and Shadowthrone, with the Hounds gathering close, watched the Toblakai ride away on his Jhag horse.

A thump of the cane. 'Did you sense the ones in his sword?'

Cotillion nodded.

'They were . . .' Shadowthrone seemed to struggle with the next word, '. . . *proud.'*

And again, Cotillion could do little more than nod.

Abruptly, Shadowthrone giggled, the sound making the two new Hounds flinch – a detail he seemed not to notice.

'Oh,' he crooned, 'all those poor clerks!'

'Is that a cloud on the horizon?'

At Reccanto Ilk's query, Mappo glanced up and followed the man's squinting gaze. He rose suddenly. 'That's more than a cloud,' he said.

Sweetest Sufferance, sitting nearby, grunted and wheezed herself upright, brushing sand from her ample behind. 'Master Qu – ellll!' she sang.

Mappo watched as the crew started scrabbling, checking the leather straps and fastening rings and clasps dangling from the carriage. The horses shifted about, suddenly restless, eyes rolling and ears flattening. Gruntle came up to stand beside the Trell. 'That's one ugly storm,' he said, 'and it looks to be bearing down right on us.'

'These people baffle me,' Mappo admitted. 'We are about to get obliterated, and they look . . . excited.'

'They are mad, Mappo.' He eyed the Trell for a long moment, then said, 'You must be desperate to have hired this mob.'

'Why is it,' Mappo asked, 'that Master Quell seemed indifferent to unleashing an undead dragon into this world?'

'Well, hardly indifferent. He said *oops!* At least, I think that's what I heard, but perhaps that was but my imagination. This Trygalle Guild . . . these carriages, they must be dragging things across realms all the time. Look at yon walking corpse.'

They did so, observing in silence as the desiccated figure, holding a collection of cast-off straps and rope, stood speculatively eyeing one of the carriage's spoked wheels.

The wind freshened suddenly, cooler, strangely charged.

One of the horses shrilled and began stamping the sand. After a moment the others caught the same feverish anxiety. The carriage rocked, edged

forward. Master Quell was helping Precious Thimble through the door, hastening things at the end with a hard shove to her backside. He then looked round, eyes slightly wild, until he spied Mappo.

'Inside you go, good sir! We're about to leave!'

'Not a moment too soon,' Gruntle said.

Mappo set out for the carriage, then paused and turned to Gruntle. 'Please, be careful.'

'I will, as soon as I figure out what's about to happen. Quell! What warren are we using now? And hadn't you better get the way through opened?'

Quell stared at him. 'Get on the damned carriage!'

'Fine, but tell me—'

'You idiot!' shouted Faint from where she sat on the roof. 'Don't you get it?' And she jabbed a finger at the churning black cloud now almost towering over them. *'That's* our ride!'

'But – wait – how—'

'Climb aboard, you oaf, or drown!'

'Climb aboard,' shrieked Sweetest Sufferance, 'and maybe drown anyway!'

Gruntle saw that the corpse had tied itself to the wheel.

*Gods below, what am I doing here?*

A roar exploded on the reef and Gruntle whirled round to see the gust front's devastating arrival, a wall of thrashing, spume-crested water, rising, charging, lifting high to devour the entire island.

He lunged for the carriage. As he scrambled up the side and fumbled for the lashing, Reccanto Ilk, squinting, asked, 'Is it here yet?'

The horses began screaming in earnest.

And all at once, the short-sighted idiot had his answer.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

You would call us weak?
Fear talks out of the side of the mouth
Each item in your list is an attack
That turns its stab upon yourself
Displaying the bright terrors
That flaw the potential for wonder

You drone out your argument
As if stating naught but what is obvious
And so it is but not in the way you think
The pathos revealed is your paucity
Of wisdom disguised as plain speak
From your tower of reason

As if muscle alone bespoke strength
As if height measures the girth of will
As if the begotten snips thorns from the rose
As if the hearthfire cannot devour a forest
As if courage flows out lost monthly
In wasted streams of dead blood

Who is this to utter such doubt?
Priest of a cult false in its division
I was there on the day the mob awoke
Storming the temple of quailing half-men
You stood gape-jawed behind them
As your teachings were proved wrong

Shrink back from true anger
Flee if you can this burgeoning strength
The shape of the rage against your postulated
Justifications is my soldier's discipline

Sure in execution and singular in purpose
Setting your head atop the spike

*Last Day of the Man Sect*
Sevelenatha of Genabaris
(cited in 'Treatise on Untenable
Philosophies among Cults'
Genorthu Stulk)

Many children, early on, acquire a love of places they have never been. Often, such wonder is summarily crushed on the crawl through the sludge of murky, confused adolescence on to the flat, cracked pan of adulthood with its airless vistas ever lurking beyond the horizon. Oh, well, sometimes such gifts of curiosity, delight and adventure do indeed survive the stationary trek, said victims ending up as artists, scholars, inventors and other criminals bent on confounding the commonplace and the platitudes of peaceful living. But never mind them for now, since, for all their flailing subversions, nothing really ever changes unless in service to convenience.

Bainisk was still, in the sheltered core of his being, a child. Ungainly with growth, yes, awkward in a body with which he had not yet caught up, but he had yet to surrender his love of the unknown. And so it should be wholly understandable that he and young Harllo should have shared a spark of delight and wonder, the kind that wove tight between them so that not even the occasional snarl could truly sever the binding.

In the week following that fateful tear in the trust between them, Harllo had come to believe that he was once more truly alone in the world. Wounds scabbed over and scabs fell away to reveal faint scars that soon faded almost out of existence, and the boy worked on, crawling into fissures, scratching his way along fetid, gritty cracks in the deep rock. Choking at times on bad air, stung by blind centipedes and nipped by translucent spiders. Bruised by shifting stones, his eyes wide in the darkness as he searched out the glitter of ore on canted, close walls.

At week's end, however, Bainisk was with him once more, passing him a jug of silty lakewater as he backed out of a fissure and sat down on the warm, dry stone of the tunnel floor, and in this brief shared moment the tear slowly began to heal, re-knitted in the evasiveness of their eyes that would not yet lock on to the reality of their sitting side by side – far beneath the world's surface, two beating hearts that echoed naught but each other – and this was how young boys made amends. Without words, with spare gestures that, in their rarity, acquired all the necessary significance. When Harllo was done drinking he passed back the jug.

'Venaz is on me all the time now,' Bainisk said. 'I tried it, with him again, I mean. But it's not the same. We're both too old for what we had, once. All he ever talks about is stuff that bores me.'

'He just likes hurting people.'

Bainisk nodded. 'I think he wants to take over my job. He argued over every order I gave him.'

'People like him always want to take over,' Harllo said. 'And most times when other people see it they back off and let them. That's what I don't get, Bainisk. It's the scariest thing of all.'

That last admission was uncommon between boys. The notion of being frightened. But theirs was not a normal world, and to pretend that there was nothing to fear was not among the few privileges they entertained. Out here, people didn't need reasons to hurt someone. They didn't need reasons for doing anything.

'Tell me about the city again, Mole.'

'There's a haunted tower. My uncle took me to see it once. He has big hands, so big that when he holds yours it's like your hand disappears and there's nothing in the world could pull you apart. Anyway, there's a ghost in that tower. Named Hinter.'

Bainisk set on him wide eyes. 'Did you see it? Did you see that ghost?'

'No, it was daytime. They're hard to see in daytime.'

'It's dark enough down here,' Bainisk said, looking round. 'But I ain't never seen a ghost.'

Harllo thought to tell him, then. It had been his reason for bringing up the story in the first place, but he found himself holding back yet again. He wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the skeleton wasn't a true ghost. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'the dead don't go away. I mean, sometimes, they die but the soul doesn't, er, leave the body. It stays where it is, where it always was.'

'Was this Hinter like that?'

'No, he was a real ghost. A spirit with no body.'

'So what makes ghosts of some people but not others?'

Harllo shrugged. 'Don't know, Bainisk. Maybe spirits with a reason to stay are the ones that become ghosts. Maybe the Lord of Death doesn't want them, or lets them be so they can maybe finish doing what they need to do. Maybe they don't realize they're dead.' He shrugged again. 'That's what my uncle said. He didn't know either, and not knowing made him mad – I could tell by the way he held my hand tighter.'

'He got mad at a ghost?'

'Could be. That's what I figure, anyway. I didn't say nothing to make him mad, so it must have been the ghost. His not knowing what it wanted or something.'

Harllo could well recall that moment. Like Bainisk, he'd asked lots of questions, amazed that such a thing as a ghost could exist, could be hiding, watching them, thinking all its ghost thoughts. And Gruntle had tried to answer him, though it was obviously a struggle. And when Harllo asked him if maybe his father – who was dead – might be a ghost out there somewhere far away, his uncle had said nothing. And when he asked if maybe his ghost father was still around because he was looking for his son, then Gruntle's big hand squeezed tight and then tighter for a breath or two, not enough to actually hurt Harllo, but close. And then the grip softened once more, and Gruntle took him off to buy sweets.

He'd probably seen Hinter, looking out through one of the gloomy windows of the tower. He'd probably wanted to tell Hinter to go away and never come back. Like bad fathers did. Because maybe Harllo's father wasn't dead at all, since one time his real mother had said something about *'putting the bastard away'*, and though Harllo didn't know the precise meaning of 'bastard' he'd heard it often enough to guess it was a word used for people no one liked having around.

But thinking about Gruntle made him sad, so instead he reached for the jug of water again and drank deep.

Bainisk watched him, and then rose. 'There's a new chute that's been cleared. I was thinking maybe you could climb it, if you was rested up enough.'

'Sure, Bainisk. I'm ready.'

They set out in silence. But this time the silence wasn't uncomfortable, and Harllo felt such a wave of relief when he realized this that his eyes welled up for a moment. Silly, really, and dangerous besides. When he had a moment when Bainisk wasn't looking, he quickly wiped his grimy cheeks and then dried the backs of his hands on his tunic.

Even had he been turned towards Harllo, Bainisk probably would not have noticed. His mind was stepping stealthily on to the worn stones of the path leading to Hinter's Tower, so that he could see the ghost for himself. What a thing that would be! To see with his own eyes something that he had never seen before!

There in that amazing city so far away. Where all manner of wonders jostled with the crowds on all the bright streets. Where ghosts argued with landlords over rent. Where people had so much food they got fat and had to be carried around. And people didn't hurt other people for no good reason, and people like Venaz got exactly what they deserved.

Oh yes, he did love that city, that place where he had never been.

Don't be absurd. The modestly pudgy man in the red waistcoat is not so crass as to fish for weeping multitudes in the rendition of this moment, nor so awkward with purple intent. Give Kruppe some credit, you who are so quick to cast aspersions like hooks into a crowded pool (caught something, did you? No, dear friend, do not crow your prowess, 'twas only this carp desperate to get out).

The water's reflection is not so smooth; oh, no, not so smooth.

Is Bainisk's city quaint, possibly even cute and heartwarming, in a softly tragic way? Not the point!

Some of us, you see (or don't), still dream of that city. Where none of us has ever been.

That, dear ones, is the point.

Second guessing is murder. Or, depending on one's point of view, suicide. Blend had found plenty of opportunity to consider such matters while lying bleeding on the floor of K'rul's Bar. It had been close, and without Mallet around the prospects of a thorough healing of her wounds was something she would just have to live without. The Councilman, Coll, had sent over a local cutter with passing skills in common Denul, and he had managed to half knit the ruptured flesh and stem the flow of blood, and then had taken needle and gut to suture the wounds. All of which left Blend propped up on her bed, barely able to move.

K'rul's Bar remained closed. What had once been a temple was now a crypt. From what Picker had told her, there wasn't a patch of raw earth in the cellars below that wasn't soft and queasy underfoot. The Elder God never had it so good.

Bluepearl and Mallet, both dead. The very idea of that left gaping holes that opened out beneath every thought, every feeling that leaked through her grim control. The bastards had survived decades of war, battle after battle, only to get cut down in their retirement by a mob of assassins.

The shock lingered, there in the echoes of empty rooms, the silences from all the wrong places, the bitter arguments that erupted between Antsy and Picker in the office or in the corridors. If Duiker remained resident – if he hadn't fled – he was silent, witnessing, as any historian would, every opinion strapped down into immobility. And, it seemed, thoroughly uninterested in whether she – or any of them – lived or died.

The sunlight creeping through the shutters told her it was day, possibly late afternoon, and she was hungry and maybe, just maybe, they'd all forgotten her. She'd heard the occasional thump from the main floor below, a few murmured conversations, and was contemplating finding something to pound on the floor when she heard steps approaching along the corridor. A moment later her door opened and in strode Scillara, bearing a tray.

Something sweet and avid curled up deep in Blend's gut, then squirmed at a succession of delicious thoughts. 'Gods, you're a sight. I was moments

from slipping away, straight into Hood's hoary arms, but now, all at once—'

'You have reason to live, yes, all that. It's tapu – I hope you don't mind, but the only cuisine I know at all is Seven Cities, and little enough of that.'

'They've got you cooking now?'

'Pays my room and board. At least,' she added as she set the tray down on Blend's lap, 'no one's demanded I clear my tab.'

Blend looked down at the skewers of meat and vegetables and fruit. The pungent aroma of greenspice made her eyes water. 'Money can go piss itself,' she said.

Scillara's eyes widened.

Blend shrugged, reaching for the first skewer. 'We were never in this to get rich, love. It was just . . . something to do, a place to be. Besides, we're not going to hold our hands out when it comes to you and Barathol, and Chaur. Gods below, you dragging Duiker off on a date kept the old fool alive. And Barathol and Chaur arrived like a mailed fist – from what I hear, just in time, too. We may be idiots, Scillara, but we're loyal idiots.'

'I imagine,' Scillara said, pulling a chair close, 'the Assassins' Guild is not thinking of you as idiots at the moment. More like a hornet's nest they regret kicking. Regret?' She snorted. 'That's too mild a word. If you think you're reeling, consider the Guild Master right now.'

'He'll recover,' Blend said. 'Us? I'm not so sure. Not this time.'

Scillara's heavy-lidded eyes settled on Blend for a long moment, and then she said, 'Picker was badly shaken. Still is, in fact. Time and again I see the colour drain from her face, I see her knees go weak, and she reaches out to grab hold of something. Middle of the night, she's up and pacing the hallways – she acts like Hood's at her shoulder these days—'

'That's just it, though, isn't it? A few years ago and she'd be strapping on the armour and counting quarrels – we'd have to chain her down to keep her from charging off—'

'You don't get it, do you, Blend?'

'What?'

'Years ago, as you say, she was a soldier – so were you.

A soldier lives with certain possibilities. Needs to keep in mind what might happen at any time. But you're all retired now. Time to put all that away. Time to finally relax.'

'Fine. It takes a while to get it all back—'

'Blend, Picker's the way she is right now because she almost lost *you.'*

In the silence that followed that statement, Blend's mind was awhirl. 'Then . . .'

'She can't bear to come in here and see you the way you are. So pale. So weak.'

'And that's what's keeping her from hunting the killers down? That's ridiculous. Tell her, from me, Scillara, that all this going soft shit is, um, unattractive. Tell her, if she's not ready to start talking vengeance, then she can forget about me. We've never run from anything in our lives, and as soon as I'm back on my feet, I plan on a rat hunt the likes of which the Guild has never seen.'

'All right.'

'Is this what all the arguing's about? Her and Antsy?'

A nod.

'Find me a High Denul healer, will you? I'll pay whatever it takes.'

'Fine. Now eat.'

The corpse still smelled of fermented peaches. Laid out on a long table in one of the back rooms, the Seguleh might have been sleeping one off, and Picker expected the ghastly warrior's serenely closed eyes to flicker open at any moment. The thought sent shivers through her and she glanced over once more at Duiker.

'So, Historian, you've done some thinking on this, some jawing with that bard and that alchemist friend of yours. Tell us, what in Hood's name are all these pickled Seguleh doing in the cellar?'

Duiker frowned, rubbed at the back of his neck, and would not meet Picker's hard stare. 'Baruk didn't take the news well. He seemed . . . upset. How many casks have you examined?'

'There's twelve of the bastards, including this one. Three are women.'

Duiker nodded. 'They can choose. Warriors or not. If not, they cannot be challenged. Seems to relate to infant mortality.'

Picker frowned. 'What does?'

'Denul and midwifery. If most children generally survive, then mothers don't need to birth eight or ten of them in the hopes that one or two make it —' 'Well, that's the way it is everywhere.'

'Of course,' Duiker continued as if he had not heard her statement, 'some cultures have an overriding need to increase their population base. And this can impose strictures on women. There's a high attrition rate among the Seguleh. A duelling society by its very nature cuts down the survival rate once adulthood is reached. Young warriors in their prime – probably as deadly as a war, only this is a war that never ends. Still, there must be periods – cycles, perhaps – when young women are freed up to choose their own path.'

Picker's eyes settled on the corpse on the table while Duiker spoke. She tried to imagine such a society, wherein like bhederin cows all the women stood moaning as their tails were pushed to one side almost as soon as the latest calf had dropped out bleating on to the ground. It was madness. It was *unfair.* 'Good thing even Seguleh women wear masks,' she muttered.

'Sorry, what?'

She scowled across at the historian. 'Hides all the rage.'

'Oh, well, I don't know that the non-warrior women do – it never occurred to me to ask. But I see your point.'

'But is that enough?' she asked. 'Do so many warriors kill each other that it's necessary to demand that of the women?'

Duiker glanced at her, then away again.

*The bastard's hiding some suspicions.*

'I don't know, Picker. Could be. Their savagery is infamous.'

'How long do you think these ones have been down there? In the cellar, I mean, in those casks?'

'The seals are templar. Baruk suggests that the cult persisted, in some residual form, long after its presumed extinction.'

'Decades? Centuries?'

He shrugged.

'But what are they doing here in Darujhistan anyway? Those islands are right off the south end of the damned continent. Nearly a thousand leagues between them and this city.'

'I don't know.'

*Yeah, right.* Sighing, she turned away. 'Seen Antsy?'

'At the bar.'

'Typical. Depleting our stock.'

'Your indecision has left him despondent.'

'Stuff that, Duiker,' she snapped, walking from the room, leaving him there with that damned corpse. It was a contest which of them was the least forthcoming, in any case, and she was tired of the duck and dodge. Yet, something in all of that had lodged in her the suspicion that the Guild contract out on them was connected, somehow, with this old temple and all its grisly secrets. *Find the connection, and maybe find the piece of shit who put the chop on us. Find him, or her, so I can shove a cusser up inside nice and deep.*

Antsy was leaning on the bar, glowering at nothing in particular, at least until he found a perfect victim in Picker as she walked up. 'Careful, woman,' he growled, 'I ain't in the mood.'

'Ain't in the mood for what?'

'For anything.'

'Except one thing.'

'Anything you might try on me, is what I meant. As for the other thing, well, I've already decided to go it alone if I have to.'

'So,' she leaned on the bar beside him, 'what are you waiting for, then?'

'Blend. Once she's back on her feet, Pick, she'll be hungry enough to take the fight to 'em.' He tugged on his moustache, then scowled at her. 'It's you I can't figure.'

'Antsy,' Picker said, sighing, 'much as I'd love to murder every damned assassin in this city, and the Guild Master, too, they're not the source of the problem. Someone hired them, only we don't know who, and we don't know why. We've been through this before. We're back right where we started, in fact, only this time we're down two.' She found she was trembling, and was unable to meet Antsy's stare. 'You know, I find myself wishing Ganoes Paran was here – if anybody could work out what's going on, it's the Captain.'

Antsy grunted. 'Master of the Deck, aye.' He drank down the last of his drink and straightened. 'Fine, let's go to the Finnest House, then – maybe he's in there, maybe he's not. Either way, it's doing something.'

'And leave Blend here on her own?'

'She's not alone. There's Duiker and Scillara. Not to mention that bard. There ain't nobody coming back to finish us, not in the daytime at least. We can be back before dusk, Pick.'

Still she hesitated.

Antsy stepped close. 'Listen, I ain't so stupid, I know what's goin' on in your head. But us just sitting here is us waiting for their next move. You know the marine doctrine, Corporal. It ain't our job to react – it's our job to hit first and make *them* do the reacting. Twice now they hit us – they do it again and we're finished.'

Despite the alcoholic fumes drifting off the man, his blue eyes were hard and clear, and Picker knew he was right, and yet . . . she was afraid. And she knew he could see it, was struggling with it – badly – since fear was not something he'd expect from her. *Not ever. Gods, you've become an old woman, Pick. Frail and cowering.*

*They've killed your damned friends. They damn near killed your dearest love.*

'I doubt he's there,' she said. 'Else he'd have been by. He's gone somewhere, Antsy. Might never be back and why would he? Wherever Paran's gone, he's probably busy – he's the type. Always in the middle of some damned thing.'

'All right,' Antsy allowed. 'Still, maybe there's some way we can, um, send him a message.'

Her brows rose. 'Now that's an idea, Antsy. Glad one of us is thinking.'

'Aye. Can we go now, then?'

They set out, making use of a side postern gate. Both wore cloaks, hiding armour and their swords, the weapons loose in their scabbards. Antsy also carried two sharpers, each in its own cloth sack, one knotted to his weapon harness and the other down at his belt. He could tug a grenado loose and fling it in its sack as one might throw a slingstone. It was his own invention, and he'd practised with a stone inside the sack, acquiring passable skill. Hood knew he was no sapper, but he was learning.

Nothing infuriated him more than losing a fight. True, they'd come out the other side, while pretty much all of the assassins had died, so it wasn't really a defeat, but it felt like one. Since retiring, his handful of Malazan companions had come to feel like family. Not in the way a squad did, since

squads existed to fight, to kill, to wage war, and this made the tightness between the soldiers a strange one. Stained with brutality, with the extremes of behaviour that made every moment of life feel like a damned miracle. No, this family wasn't like that. They'd all calmed down some. Loosened up, left the nasty shit far behind. Or so they'd thought.

As he and Picker set out for Coll's estate and the wretched house behind its grounds, he tried to think back to when he'd had nothing to do with this kind of life, back to when he'd been a scrawny bow-legged runt in Falar. Bizarrely, his own mental image of his ten-year-old face retained the damned moustache and he was pretty sure he'd yet to grow one, but memories were messy things. Unreliable, maybe mostly lies, in fact. A scatter of images stitched together by invented shit, so that what had been in truth a time as chaotic as the present suddenly seemed like a narration, a story.

The mind in the present was ever eager to narrate its own past, each one its own historian, and since when were historians reliable on anything? *Aye, look at Duiker. He spun a fine tale, that one about Coltaine and the Chain of Dogs. Heartbreaking, but then those were always the best kind, since they made a person* feel *– when so much of living was avoiding feeling anything. But was any of it real? Aye, Coltaine got killed for real. The army got shattered just like he said. But any of the rest? All those details?*

*No way of ever knowing. And it don't really matter in the end, does it?*

*Just like our own tales. Who we were, what we did. The narration going on, until it stops. Sudden, like a caught breath that never again lets out.*

*End of story.*

The child with the moustache was looking at him, there in his head. Scowling, suspicious, maybe disbelieving. *'You think you know me, old man? Not a chance. You don't know a thing and what you think you remember ain't got nothing to do with me. With how I'm thinking. With what I'm feeling. You're farther away than my own da, that miserable, bitter tyrant neither of us could ever figure out, not you, not me, not even him. Maybe he's not us, but then he's not him, either.*

*'Old man, you're as lost as I am and don't pretend no different. Lost in life . . . till death finds you.'*

Well, this was why he usually avoided thinking about his own past. Better left untouched, hidden away, locked up in a trunk and dropped over the side to sink down into the depths. Problem was, he was needing to dredge up some things all over again. Thinking like a soldier, for one. Finding that nasty edge again, the hard way of looking at things. The absence of hesitation.

Gallons of ale wasn't helping. Just fed his despondency, his sense of feeling too old, too old for all of it, now.

'Gods below, Antsy, I can hear you grinding your teeth from over here. Whatever it is, looks like it's tasting awful.'

He squinted across at her. 'Expect me to be skippin' a dance down this damned street? We're in more trouble than we've ever been, Pick.'

'We've faced worse—'

'No. Because when we faced worse we was ready for it. We was trained to deal with it. Grab it by the throat, choke the life from it.' He paused, and then spat on to the cobbles before adding, 'I'm starting to realize what "retirement" really means. Everything we let go of, we're now scrabbling to get back, only it's outa reach. *It's fuckin' out of reach.'*

She said nothing, and that told Antsy she knew he was right; that she felt the same.

Scant comfort, this company.

They reached Coll's estate, went round towards the back wall. The journey from K'rul's Bar to here was already a blur in Antsy's mind, so unimportant as to be instantly worthless. He'd not registered a single figure amidst the crowds on the streets. Had they been tracked? Followed? Probably. 'Hood's breath, Pick, I wasn't checkin' if we picked up a sniffin' dog. See what I mean?'

'We did,' she replied. 'Two of 'em. Lowlifes, not actual assassins, just their dogs, like you say. They're keeping their distance – probably warned right off us. I doubt they'll follow us into the wood.'

'No,' Antsy agreed. 'They'd smell ambush.'

'Right, so never mind them.'

She led the way into the overgrown thicket behind the estate. The uneven forest floor was littered at the edges with rubbish, but this quickly dwindled as they pushed deeper into the shadowy, overgrown copse. Few people, it was obvious, wanted to set eyes on the Finnest House, to feel the chill of it looking right back at them. Attention from something as ghastly as that dark edifice was unwanted attention.

Thirty uneven strides in, they caught sight of the black half-stone half-wood walls, the wrinkled, scarred face of the house, shutters matted like rotted wicker, no light leaking through from anywhere. Vines snaked up the sides, sprawled out over the humped ground in the low-walled yard. The few trees in that yard were twisted and leafless, roots bared like bones.

'More lumps than last time I was here,' Picker observed as they made their way towards the gate.

Antsy grunted. 'No shortage of idiots tryin' t'get inside. Thinkin' they'll find treasure . . .'

'Secret short cuts to power,' she added. 'Magical items and crap.'

'An' all they got was an early grave.' He hesitated at the gate and glanced at Picker. 'Could be we end up the same way.'

'Stay on the path, that's the trick. Follow me.'

He fell into step close behind her as she set out along the narrow, winding track of tilted pavestones. Too close, as he trod on her heel and almost made her stumble. She shot him a vicious look over one shoulder before continuing on.

The sheer lack of anything untoward had Antsy's nerves overwrought by the time they reached the door. He watched as Picker lifted a gloved hand,

made a fist, hesitated, then thumped it hard against the black wood. The boom reverberated as if an abyss waited on the other side.

They waited. From here, all sounds of the city beyond this wood had vanished, as if the normal world had ceased to exist, or, perhaps, the endless rush of life out there held no relevance to what loomed before them now, this grotesque intrusion from another realm.

A dozen heartbeats. Picker made to pound once more on the door.

The clunk of a latch sounded dully through the thick wood, and a moment later the door creaked back.

Paran had spoken of the lich resident in the Finnest House, the blasted creature that had once been a Jaghut, but this was Antsy's first sight of it. Tall (gods how he hated tall things), gaunt yet large-boned, adorned in a long ragged coat of black chain. Bared head with long colourless hair hanging down from patches – where the scalp was visible there was twisted scarring, and in one place something had punctured through the skull, and within the uneven hole left behind there was only darkness, as if the apparition's brain had simply withered away. Tusks in a shattered face, the eyes shrunken back into shadows. All in all, Antsy was not inspired with confidence that this fell meeting would proceed in anything like a reasonable fashion.

'Lord Raest,' Picker said, bowing. 'I am a friend of Ganoes Paran. If you recall, we met—'

'I know who you are, Corporal Picker,' the lich replied in a deep, resonant voice.

'This is Sergeant Antsy—'

'What do you want?'

'We need to find Ganoes Paran—'

'He is not here.'

'We need to get a message to him.'

'Why?'

Picker glanced at Antsy, then back up at Raest. 'Well, it's a complicated tale – can we come inside?'

Raest's dead eyes held steady on her for a long moment, and then he asked, 'Do you expect me to serve refreshments as well?'

'Er, no, that won't be necessary, Raest.'

The Jaghut stepped back.

Picker edged round him and halted a few steps in. Antsy pushed in behind her. They stood in a vaulted entryway, raw black stone underfoot. Opposite the front door there were twin doors and a narrow corridor off to the right and left. The air was dry and warm, smelling of freshly turned earth – reminding Antsy of the cellar beneath K'rul's Bar.

'Been digging graves?' he asked, and then cursed himself, trying to ignore Picker's wild stare.

Raest shut the door and faced them. 'What manner of refreshments were you expecting, Sergeant Antsy? I am afraid I have nothing buried within the house. If you like, however—'

'No that's fine,' Picker said hastily.

Antsy could only nod agreement. His mouth had dried up, tongue like a piece of leather gummed against the palate. And he needed to empty his bladder, but the thought of asking directions to the water closet was suddenly akin to demanding that the Jaghut hand over all his money or else.

Raest studied them in silence for a moment longer, and then said, 'Follow me, if you must.'

The lich's moccasin-wrapped feet made rasping sounds. Cloth rustled, the mail of the coat crackling, as Raest walked to the double doors and pushed them open.

Within was a main room bearing a stone fireplace directly opposite, wherein flames flickered cosily, and two deep, high-backed chairs to either

side, sitting on a thick woven rug bearing arcane, geometric patterns barely visible in the general gloom. Large tapestries covered the walls to either side, one clearly Malazan in origin – probably Untan given the subject matter (some antiquated court event, significance long lost but no doubt relevant to House Paran); the other was local and depicted a scene from the Night of the Moon, when Moon's Spawn had descended to brush the highest buildings in the city; when dragons warred in the night sky, and Raest himself had attempted his assault upon Darujhistan. The image focused on the dragons, one black and silver-maned, the other muted bronze or brown. Jaws and talons were locked upon one another as they fought in midair, with the backdrop the base of Moon's Spawn and the silhouettes of rooftops and spires, all bordered in an intricate pattern of Great Ravens in flight.

'That's not bad,' Picker muttered, eyeing the work.

Antsy grunted, not one to ponder too much on artwork beyond identifying whatever scene it happened to be recording. Personally, he could not imagine a more useless talent, and thanked the gods he'd never been cursed with such creative misery. Most of his own memories of great events he had witnessed employed stick figures, and that was good enough for him. It did not occur to him that this was at all unusual.

Raest gestured to the two chairs. 'Sit down,' he said, the tone only vaguely related to an invitation. When they had done so, both angling their chairs to face the Jaghut, he said, 'Explain to me, if you will, how precisely you intend to send Ganoes Paran a message.'

'We have no idea,' Picker said, with a queasy smile. 'We were hoping you might have some suggestions.'

'I have many suggestions,' Raest replied, 'none of which are relevant to your request.'

Antsy slowly narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

Picker opened her mouth a few times, breaking off a succession of possible responses, the repeated gaping reminding Antsy of netted fish on

the deck of his da's fisher boat. *Unless I just made that up. All a lie, maybe. Maybe I seen a fish on some other deck. How can I be sure? How can—*

'One possibility occurs to me,' Raest said. 'It would, I suspect, require that one of you be an adept with the Deck of Dragons. Or possessing the potential thereof.'

'I see,' said Picker. 'Well, I've had a few brushes with the Deck.'

'You are an illustrator of Decks?'

'What? Oh, not that kind of brush. I mean, I've had my hands on 'em a few times.'

'Did such contact leave you damaged, Corporal Picker?'

'Damaged how?'

'Are you, perhaps, now insane?'

She sat upright. 'Hang on, how in Hood's name would I even know if I was insane or not?'

'Precisely,' said Raest, and waited.

Antsy's gaze fixed once more on the Jaghut. 'Pick,' he finally growled.

She twisted to face him in exasperation. 'What is it now, Antsy?'

'This bastard's having us on.'

Her eyes bulged momentarily, and then she looked once more at the Jaghut.

Who shrugged. 'One needs to amuse oneself on occasion. Company is so very rare these days.'

'So when it arrives,' Antsy snapped, 'you treat it like dirt? Do you think maybe there's a connection atwixt the two, you hoary lich?'

'Like dirt? I think not. More like . . . with amiable contempt.'

'You got a few things to learn about people, Jaghut.'

'Undoubtedly, Sergeant Antsy. Alas, I find myself disinclined to make any effort in that direction.'

'Oh? And what direction do you make your efforts in?'

'When I discover one I will let you know, if it proves of any interest – to either me or, of course, you. In the meantime, I have no idea if communication is possible with Ganoes Paran. Perhaps if you informed me of your present crisis, I might be able to assist you in some way that does not involve precipitous, desperate acts that might ultimately inconvenience me.'

'Hood forbid we do that,' snarled Antsy.

'Hood is not one to forbid much of anything,' Raest observed.

'Can't think he much likes these Azath Houses,' Picker said, having recovered from her shock and irritation and, perhaps, indignation. 'All this trapping of souls and things like you, Raest.'

'I doubt I rate highly on Hood's wish list,' the undead Jaghut replied.

Antsy grunted a laugh. 'All right, I'm finally working out your sense of humour. And I thought Malazan marines were dry, Abyss below! Fine, Raest, let's play this game for real. If you can help us with our problem, we'll do something for you in return. If it's within our abilities, that is, so nothing like "get me outa here" or anything like that. But, you know, other stuff.'

'I do have a modest request. Very well, I accept the reciprocal engagement.'

Antsy grinned across at Picker, and then said to Raest, 'It's this. Someone's taken out a contract on us. We don't know why. We're thinking maybe Paran can work out who and what's got 'em so aggravated.'

The Jaghut stared.

Picker cleared her throat. 'Possible causes. One, we're Malazans. Veterans. We've made more than a few enemies on this continent. Two, we own K'rul's Bar, which used to be K'rul's Belfry, which used to be K'rul's

Temple. In the cellar we just found twelve pickled Seguleh, maybe centuries old, but looking fresh. Since they're, er, pickled.' She paused, drew a breath, and then continued, 'Three, well, I ain't got to three yet. The way I figure it, it's all got to do with K'rul – maybe some cultists want the temple back. Maybe someone put in an order for pickled Seguleh and wants 'em delivered.'

Antsy stared at her. 'Someone did what? Pick, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard.'

'I wouldn't argue with that,' she said, 'only I'm desperate, and besides, I got a hunch those Seguleh are part of the problem.'

Antsy looked to Raest. 'So there it is. Got any suggestions or are you just going to stand there for ever?'

'Yes I am,' Raest replied, 'but that detail is not relevant. As for suggestions, I suggest you kill every assassin in the city.'

'Then whoever wants us dead just starts hiring thugs,' Picker said.

'Kill all thugs.'

Antsy tugged at his moustache. 'Ain't practical. There's only three of us left – it'd take years.'

'Kidnap the Guild Master and torture him or her to reveal the client. Then kill the client.'

'Killing the client makes sense to us,' Picker said, nodding. 'The kidnapping thing doesn't sound very feasible – we'd have to carve through a few hundred assassins to do it. Besides, we don't know where the Guild Master's hideout is. We could capture and torture an assassin to find that out, but they probably operate in cells which means whoever we get might not know a thing. The point is, we don't know who the client is. We need to find out.'

Raest said, 'Your suspicion that the K'rul Temple is central to this matter is probably accurate. Determining the specifics, however, would best be served by enlisting the assistance of the Master of the Deck.'

'That's what we wanted in the first place!' Antsy shouted.

'Extraordinary, isn't it?'

Antsy glared up at the infuriating lich, bit down a few retorts that might prove unwise. He drew a deep breath to calm himself, and then said in a nice, quiet tone, 'So let's see if we can send him a message, shall we?'

'Follow me,' Raest said.

Back into the corridor, turning right, five strides to a narrow door on the left that led into the squat round tower, up the spiral staircase, arriving into the upper level – a circular room with the walls bearing oversized painted renditions of the cards of the Deck of Dragons. Something twisted the eye in this chamber and Picker almost staggered.

'Gods below,' muttered Antsy. 'This place is magicked – makes me sick to the stomach.'

The images swirled, blurred, shifted in rippling waves that crossed from every conceivable direction, a clash of convergences inviting vertigo no matter where the eye turned. Picker found herself gasping. She squeezed shut her eyes, heard Antsy cursing as he backed out of the room.

Raest's dry voice drifted faintly into her head. 'The flux has increased. There appears to be some manner of . . . deterioration. Even so, Corporal Picker, if you focus your mind and concentrate on Ganoes Paran, the efficacy of your will may prove sufficient to anchor in place the Master's own card, which perhaps will awaken his attention. Unless of course he is otherwise engaged. Should your willpower prove unequal to the task, I am afraid that what remains of your sanity will be torn away. Your mind itself will be shredded by the maelstrom, leaving you a drooling wreck.' After a moment, he added, 'Such a state of being may not be desirable. Of course, should you achieve it, you will not care one way or the other, which you may consider a blessing.'

'Well,' she replied, 'that's just great. Give me a moment, will you?'

She tugged from her memory the captain's not unpleasant face, sought to fix it before her mind's eye. *Ganoes Paran, pay attention. Captain,*

*wherever you are. This is Corporal Picker, in Darujhistan. Ganoes, I need to talk to you.*

She saw him now, framed as would a card be framed in the Deck of Dragons. She saw that he was wearing a uniform, that of the Malazan soldier he had once been – was that her memory, conjuring up her last sight of him? But no, he looked older. He looked beaten down, smeared in dust. Spatters of dried blood on his scarred leather jerkin. The scene behind him was one of smoke and ruination, the blasted remnants of rolling farmland, tracts defined by low stone walls, but nothing green in sight. She thought she could see bodies on that dead earth.

Paran's gaze seemed to sharpen on her. She saw his mouth move but no sound reached her.

*Ganoes! Captain – listen, just concentrate back on me.*

*'—not the time, Corporal. We've landed in a mess. But listen, if you can get word to them, try. Warn them, Picker. Warn them off.'*

*Captain – someone's after the temple – K'rul's Temple. Someone's trying to kill us—*

*'—jhistan can take care of itself, Pick. Baruk knows what to do – trust him. You need to find out who wants it. Talk to Kruppe. Talk to the Eel. But listen – pass on my warning, please.'*

*Pass it on to who? Who are you talking about, Captain? And what was that about Kruppe?*

The image shredded before her eyes, and she felt something like claws tear into her mind. Screaming, she sought to reel back, pull away. The claws sank deeper, and all at once Picker realized that there was intent, there was malice. Something had arrived, and it *wanted her*.

Shrieking, she felt herself being dragged forward, into a swirling madness, into the maw of something vast and hungry, something that wanted to feed on her. For a long, long time, until her soul was gone, devoured, until nothing of her was left.

Pressure and darkness on all sides, ripping into her. She could not move.

In the midst of the savage chaos, she felt and heard the arrival of a third presence, a force flowing like a beast to draw up near her – she sensed sudden attention, a cold-eyed regard, and a voice murmured close, *'Not here. Not now. There were torcs once, that you carried. There was a debt, still unpaid. Not now. Not here.'*

The beast pounced.

Whatever had grasped hold of Picker, whatever was now feeding on her, suddenly roared in pain, in fury, and the claws tore free, slashed against its new attacker.

Snarls, the air trembling to thunder as two leviathans clashed.

Dwarfed, forgotten, small as an ant, Picker crawled away, leaking out her life in a crimson trail. She was weeping, shivering in the aftermath of the thing's feeding. It had been so . . . intractable, so horribly . . . indifferent. To who she was, to her right to her own life. *My soul . . . my soul was . . . food. That's all. Abyss below—*

She needed to find a way out. All round her chaos swarmed and shivered as the great forces battled on, there in her wake. She needed to tell Antsy things, important things. Kruppe. Baruk. And perhaps the most important detail of all. When they'd walked into the House, she had seen that the two bodies that had been lying on the floor on her last visit were gone. *Gone. Two assassins, said Paran.*

*And one of them was Vorcan.*

*She's in the city. She's out there, Antsy—*

*Concentrate! The room. In the tower – find the room—*

Crawling, weeping.

Lost.

Antsy loosed a dozen curses when Raest dragged Picker's unconscious body on to the landing. 'What did you do?'

'Alas,' the Jaghut said, stepping back as Antsy fell to his knees beside the woman, 'my warnings of the risk were insufficient.'

As Antsy set his hand upon Picker's brow he hissed and snatched it back. 'She's ice cold!' 'Yet her heart struggles on,' Raest said.

'Will she come back? Raest, you damned lich! *Will she come back?'*

'I don't know. She spoke, for a time, before the situation . . . changed. Presumably, she was speaking to Ganoes Paran.'

'What did she say?'

'Questions, for the most part. I was able, however, to glean a single name. Kruppe.'

Antsy bared his teeth. He set his hand again upon her forehead. Slightly warmer? Possibly, or this time he'd been expecting it, making it less of a shock. Hard to tell which. 'Help me get her back downstairs,' he said.

'Of course. And now, in return for my assistance, I will tell you what I seek from you.'

He glared up at the Jaghut. 'You can't be serious.'

'This time, I am, Sergeant Antsy. I wish to have a cat.'

A cat. 'To eat?'

'No, as a pet. It will have to be a dead cat, of course.

Now, permit me to take her legs, whilst you take her arms.

Perhaps some time before the hearth will revive her.'

'Do you think so?'

'No.'

This had all been his idea, and now look at what had happened. 'Picker,' he whispered, 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.'

'A white one,' said Raest.

'What?'

'A white cat. A dead white cat, Sergeant.'

*Oh, aye, Raest. One stuffed lumpy with cussers. Here, catch, you damned bastard.*

*Shit, we're down to two now. Down to two . . .*

'Never bargain with the dead. They want what you have and will give you what they have to get it. Your life for their death. Being dead, of course, whatever life they grab hold of just ends up slipping through their bony fingers. So you both lose.'

'That is rather generous of you, Hinter,' said Baruk. 'In fact, I do not recall you being so loquacious the last time we spoke.'

The apparition stood within the door frame of the tower. 'The struggle I face is between my desire to close my ghostly fingers about your throat, High Alchemist, and providing whatever service I can to this fair city. It must also be noted, the return of the Tyrant would also mark the end of what limited freedom I possess, for I would be quickly enslaved. And so, self-interest and altruism prove unlikely allies, yet sufficient to overwhelm my natural murderous urges.'

'The debate is moot,' Baruk replied, interlacing his fingers and resting his hands on his stomach, 'since I have no intention of coming within reach of your deadly grasp. No, I will remain here, in the yard.'

'Just as well,' Hinter replied. 'I haven't dusted in centuries.'

'There are forces in the city,' Baruk said after a moment, 'formidable, unpredictable forces. The threat—'

'Enough of that,' Hinter cut in. 'You know very well why most of those entities are in the city, since you invited them, High Alchemist. And as for the others on the way, well, few of those will surprise you much. They are . . . *necessary.* So, an end to your dissembling.'

'Not all of what approaches is my doing,' Baruk countered. 'Were you aware that both Lady Envy and Sister Spite are here right now? The

daughters of Draconus were *not* invited, not by me at any rate. One is bad enough, but both . . .' he shook his head. 'I fear they will leave the entire city a smouldering heap of ashes, given the chance.'

'So do something to ensure that does not happen,' Hinter said airily.

'Any suggestions on that count?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Has either one paid you a visit?'

'You strain my altruism, High Alchemist. Very well, of course Lady Envy has visited, and more than once.'

'Does she know her sister is here?'

'Probably.'

'What does Envy want, Hinter?'

'What she has always wanted, High Alchemist.'

Baruk hissed under his breath and glanced away. 'She can't have it.'

'Then I suggest you pay her sister a visit. She resides aboard—'

'I know where she is, thank you. Now, have you heard of that self-proclaimed High Priest of the Crippled God who's now squatting in an abandoned Temple of Fener? And leads a congregation growing by the day?'

'No, I have not. But are you surprised?'

'The Fallen God is a most unwelcome complication.'

'The legacy of messing with things not yet fully understood – of course, those precipitous sorcerors all paid with their lives, which prevented everyone else from delivering the kind of punishment they truly deserved. Such things are most frustrating, don't you think?'

Baruk's gaze narrowed on the ghost in the doorway.

After a moment Hinter waved an ethereal hand. 'So many . . . legacies.'

'Point taken, Necromancer. As you can see, however, I am not one to evade responsibility.'

'True, else you would have come within my reach long ago. Or, indeed, chosen a more subtle escape, as did your fellow . . . mages in the Cabal, the night Vorcan walked the shadows . . .'

Baruk stared, and then sighed. 'I have always wondered at the sudden incompetence displayed by my comrades that night. Granted, Vorcan's skills were – are – impressive.' And then he fell silent for a moment. And thought about certain matters. 'Hinter, has Vorcan visited you?'

'No. Why would she?'

Baruk was suddenly chilled. 'She made no effort at . . . discussing anything with me that night.'

'Perhaps she knew how you would respond.'

'As she would have for Derudan as well.'

'No doubt.'

'But the others . . .'

Hinter said nothing.

Baruk felt sick inside. Matters had grown far too complicated in this city. Oh, he had known that they were walking a most narrow bridge, with the yawning abyss below whispering soft invitations of surrender. But it seemed the far end was ever dwindling, stretching away, almost lost in the mists. And every step he took seemed more tenuous than the last, as if at any moment the span beneath him might simply crumble into dust.

He could understand those others in the Cabal and the sudden, perfect escape that Vorcan represented. And he recalled that flat promise in her eyes on that night long ago now – it still haunted him, the ease of her betrayal, as if the contract offered by the Malazan Empire had simply provided her with an excuse for doing something she had always wanted to do: murder every other mage in the Cabal.

He might ask her why, but Vorcan was a woman who kept her own counsel. She owed him nothing and that had not changed.

'You had better go now,' Hinter said, cutting into his thoughts.

He blinked. 'Why?'

'Because your silence is boring me, High Alchemist.'

'My apologies, Hinter,' Baruk replied. 'One last thing, and then I will indeed leave. The risk of your enslavement is very real, and is not dependent on the actual return of the Tyrant – after all, there are agents in the city even now working towards that fell resurrection. They might well decide—'

'And you imagine they might succeed, High Alchemist?'

'It is a possibility, Hinter.'

The ghost was silent for a time, and then said, 'Your solution?'

'I would set one of my watchers on your tower, Hinter. To voice the alarm should an attempt be made on you.'

'You offer to intercede on my behalf, High Alchemist?'

'I do.'

'I accept, on condition that this does not indebt me to you.'

'Of course.'

'You would rather I remain . . . neutral, and this I understand. Better this than me as an enemy.'

'You were once a most formidable sorceror—'

'Rubbish. I was passable, and fatally careless. Still, neither of us would have me serving a most miserable cause. Send your watcher, then, but give me its name, lest I invite in the wrong servant.'

'Chillbais.'

'Oh,' said Hinter, *'him.'*

As he made his way back to his estate, Baruk recalled his lone meeting with Vorcan, only a few nights after her awakening. She had entered the chamber with her usual feline grace. The wounds she had borne were long healed and she had found a new set of clothes, loose and elegant, that seemed at complete odds with her chosen profession.

He had stood before the fireplace, and offered her a slight bow to hide a sudden tremble along his nerves. 'Vorcan.'

'I will not apologize,' she said.

'I did not ask you to.'

'We have a problem, Baruk,' she said, walking over to pour herself some wine, then facing him once more. 'It is not a question of seeking prevention – we cannot stop what is coming. The issue is how we will position ourselves for that time.'

'You mean, to ensure our continued survival.'

A faint smile as she regarded him. 'Survival is not in question. We three left in the Cabal will be needed. As we were once, as we will be again. I am speaking more of our, shall we say, *level of comfort.'*

Anger flared within Baruk then. 'Comfort? What value that when we have ceased to be free?'

She snorted. 'Freedom is ever the loudest postulation among the indolent. And let's face it, Baruk, we *are* indolent. And now, suddenly, we face the end to that. Tragedy!' Her gaze hardened. 'I mean to remain in my privileged state—'

'As Mistress of the Assassins' Guild? Vorcan, there will be no need for such a Guild, no room for it.'

'Never mind the Guild. I am not interested in the Guild. It served a function of the city, a bureaucratic mechanism. Its days are fast dwindling in number.'

'Is that why you sent your daughter away?'

A flicker of true annoyance in her eyes, and she looked away. 'My reasons are not of your concern in that matter, High Alchemist.' Her tone added, *And it's none of your business, old man.*

'What role, then,' Baruk asked, 'do you envision for yourself in this new Darujhistan?'

'A quiet one,' she replied.

*Yes, quiet as a viper in the grass.* 'Until such time, I imagine, as you see an opportunity.'

She drained her wine and set down the goblet. 'We are understood, then.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I suppose we are.'

'Do inform Derudan.'

'I shall.'

And she left.

The recollection left a sour taste in Baruk's mouth. Was she aware of the *other* convergences fast closing on Darujhistan? Did she even care? Well, she wasn't the only one who could be coy. One thing he had gleaned from that night of murder years ago: Vorcan had, somehow, guessed what was on its way. Even back then, she had begun her preparations . . . all to ensure her *level of comfort.* Sending her daughter away, extricating herself from the Guild. *And visiting her version of mercy upon the others in the Cabal. And if she'd got her way, she would now be the only one left alive.*

*Think hard on that, Baruk, in the light of her professed intentions. Her desire to position herself.*

*Might she try again?*

He realized he was no longer sure she wouldn't.

This is the moment for mirrors, and surely that must be understood by now. Polished, with the barest of ripples to twist the reflection, to make what one faces both familiar and subtly altered. Eyes locked, recognition unfolding, quiet horrors flowering. What looks upon you here, now, does not mock,

denies the cogent wink, and would lead you by a dry and cool hand across the cold clay floor of the soul.

People will grieve. For the dead, for the living. For the loss of innocence and for the surrender of innocence, which are two entirely different things. We will grieve, for choices made and not made, for the mistakes of the heart which can never be undone, for the severed nerve-endings of old scars and those to come.

A grey-haired man walks through the Estate District. No more detailed description is necessary. The blood on his hands is only a memory, but some memories leave stains difficult to wash away. By nature, he observes. The world, its multitude of faces, its tide-tugged swirling sea of emotions. He is a caster of nets, a trailer of hooks. He speaks in the rhythm of poetry, in the lilt of song. He understands that there are wounds in the soul that must not be touched; but there are others that warm to the caress. He understands, in other words, the necessity of the tragic theme. The soul, he knows, will, on occasion, offer no resistance to the tale that draws blood.

Prise loose those old scars. They remind one what it is to grieve. They remind one what it is to live.

A moment for mirrors, a moment for masks. The two ever conspire to play out the tale. Again and again, my friends.

Here, take my hand.

He walks to an estate. The afternoon has waned, dusk creeps closer through the day's settling dust. Each day, there is a moment when the world has just passed by, leaving a sultry wake that hovers, suspended, not yet stirred by the awakening of night. The Tiste Edur worship this instant. The Tiste Andii are still, motionless as they wait for darkness. The Tiste Liosan have bowed their heads and turned away to grieve the sun's passing. In the homes of humans, hearthfires are stirred awake. People draw into their places of shelter and think of the night to come.

Before one's eyes, solidity seems poised, moments from crumbling into dissolution. Uncertainty becomes a law, rising supreme above all others.

For a bard, this time is a minor key, a stretch of frailty, a pensive interlude. Sadness drifts in the air, and his thoughts are filled with endings.

Arriving at the estate, he is quickly and without comment escorted into the main house, down its central corridor and out into a high-walled garden where night flowers stream down the walls, drenched blossoms opening to drink in the gathering dusk. The masked bodyguard then leaves him, for the moment alone in the garden, and the bard stands motionless for a time, the air sweet and pungent, the sound of trickling water filling the enclosed space.

He recalls the soft songs he has sung here, unaccompanied by any instrument. Songs drawn from a hundred cultures, a dozen worlds. His voice weaving together the fragments of Shadow's arrival, drawing together the day just past and the night eager to arrive.

There were secrets in music and poetry. Secrets few knew and even fewer understood. Their power often stole into a listener subtle as the memory of scent on a drawn breath, less than a whisper, yet capable of transforming the one so gifted, an instinctual ecstasy that made troubles vanish, that made all manner of grandeur possible – indeed, within reach.

A skilled bard, a wise bard, knew that at certain moments in the course of a cycle of day and night, the path into the soul of a listener was smooth, unobstructed, a succession of massive gates that swung open to a feather's touch. This was the most precious secret of all. Dusk, midnight, and that strange period of sudden wakefulness known as the watch – yes, the night and its stealthy approach belonged to the heart.

Hearing a footfall behind him, he turns.

She stands, her long black hair shimmering, her face untouched by sun or wind, her eyes a perfect reflection of the violet blossoms adorning the walls. He can see through the white linen of her dress, to the outlines of her body, roundness and curves and sweeps of aesthetic perfection – those forms and lines that murmured their own secret language to awaken desires in a man's soul.

Every sense, he knows, is a path into the heart.

Lady Envy watches him, and he is content to let her do so, as he in turn regards her.

They could discuss the Seguleh – the dead ones in the casks, the living ones serving in this estate. They could ponder all that they sensed fast approaching. He could speak of his anger, its quiet, deadly iron that was so cold it could burn at the touch – and she would see the truth of his words in his eyes. She might drift this way and that in this modest garden, brushing fingertips along trembling petals, and speak of desires so long held that she was almost insensate to the myriad roots and tendrils they had wrought through her body and soul, and he would perhaps warn her of the dangers they presented, the risk of failure that must be faced and, indeed, accepted – and she would sigh and nod and know well he spoke with wisdom.

Mocking flirtation, the jaw-dropping self-obsession, all the ways in which she amused herself when engaging with the mortals of this world, did not accompany Lady Envy to this garden. Not with this man awaiting her. Fisher kel Tath was not a young man – and there were times when she wondered if he was mortal at all, although she would never pry in search of truth – and he was not at all godlike with physical perfection. His gifts, if she could so crassly list them, would include his voice, his genius with the lyre and a dozen other obscure instruments, and the mind behind the eyes that saw all, that understood far too much of what he did see, that understood too the significance of all that remained and would ever remain hidden – yes, the mind behind the eyes and every faint hint he offered up to reveal something of that mind, its manner of observance, its stunning capacity for compassion that only blistering fools would call weakness.

No, this was one man whom she would not mock – could not, in fact.

They could have discussed many things. Instead, they stood, eyes meeting and held, and the dusk closed in with all its scents and secrets.

Storm the abyss and throw down a multitude of astounded gods! The sky cracks open from day into night, and then cracks yet again, revealing the flesh of space and the blood of time – see it rent and see it spray in glistening red droplets of dying stars! The seas boil and the earth steams and melts!

Lady Envy has found a lover.

Poetry and desire, fulminations one and the same and oh this is a secret to make thugs and brainless oafs howl at the night.

Has found a lover.

A lover.

'I dreamt I was pregnant.'

Torvald paused inside the door and hesitated just a little too long before saying, 'Why, that's great!' Tiserra shot him a quizzical look from where she stood at the table bearing her latest throw of pottery. 'It is?'

'Absolutely, darling. You can go through all the misery of that without its being real. I can imagine your sigh of relief when you awoke and realized it was nothing but a dream.'

'Well, I certainly imagined yours, my love.'

He walked in and slumped down into a chair, stretching out his legs. 'Something strange is going on,' he said.

'It was just a passing madness,' she said. 'No need for you to fret, Tor.'

'I mean at the estate.' He rubbed at his face. 'The castellan spends all his time mixing up concoctions for diseases nobody has, and even if they did, his cures are liable to kill them first. The two compound guards do nothing but toss bones and that's hardly something you'd think renegade Seguleh would do, is it? And if that's not weird enough, Scorch and Leff are actually taking their responsibilities seriously.'

At that she snorted.

'No, really,' Torvald insisted. 'And I think I know why.

They can smell it, Tis. The strangeness. The Mistress went to the Council and claimed her place and there wasn't a whisper of complaint – or so I heard from Coll – and you'd think there'd be visitors now from various power blocs in the Council, everyone trying to buy her alliance. But . . . nothing. No one. Does that make sense?'

Tiserra was studying her husband. 'Ignore it, Tor. All of it. Your task is simple – keep it that way.'

He glanced up at her. 'I would, believe me. Except that all my instincts are on fire – as if some damned white-hot dagger is hovering at my back. And not just me, but Scorch and Leff, too.' He rose, began pacing.

'I haven't begun supper yet,' Tiserra said. 'It'll be a while – why don't you go to the Phoenix Inn for a tankard or two? Say hello to Kruppe if you see him.'

'What? Oh. Good idea.'

She watched him leave, waited for a few dozen heartbeats to ensure that he'd found no reason to change his mind, and then went to one of the small trapdoors hidden in the floor, sprang the release and reached in to draw out her Deck of Dragons. She sat at the table and carefully removed the deerskin cover.

This was something she did rarely these days. She was sensitive enough to know that powerful forces were gathering in Darujhistan, making any field she attempted fraught with risk. Yet Tiserra, for all her advice to Torvald to simply ignore matters, well knew that her husband's instincts were too sharp to be summarily dismissed.

'Renegade Seguleh,' she muttered, then shook her head and collected up the Deck. Her version was Barukan, with a few cards of her own added, including one for The City – in this case, Darujhistan – and another – but no, she would not think of that one. Not unless she had to.

A tremor of fear rushed through her. The wooden cards felt cold in her hands. She decided on a spiral field and was not at all surprised when she set the centre card down and saw that it was The City, a silhouetted, familiar skyline at dusk, with the glow of blue fires rising up from below, each one like a submerged star. She studied it for a time, until those fires seemed to swim before her eyes, until the dusk the card portrayed began to flow into the world around her, one bleeding into the other, back and forth until the moment was fixed, time pinned down as if by a knife stabbed into the table. She was not seeking the future – prophecy was far too dangerous

with all the converging powers – but the present. This very instant, each strand's point of attachment in the vast web that now spanned Darujhistan.

She set down the next card. High House Shadow, The Rope, Patron of Assassins. Well, that was not too surprising, given the latest rumours. Yet she sensed the relationship was more complicated than it at first appeared – yes, the Guild was active, was snarled in something far bloodier than it had anticipated. Too bad for the Guild. Still, The Rope never played one game. There were others, beneath the surface. The obvious was nothing more than a veil.

The third card clattered on to the tabletop, and she found her hand would not rest, flinging out the next card and yet another. Three tightly bound, then. Three cards, forming their own woven nest. Obelisk, Soldier of Death, and Crown. These needed a frame. She set down the sixth card and grunted. Knight of Darkness – a faint rumble of wooden wheels, a chorus of moans drifting like smoke from the sword in the Knight's hands.

Thus, The Rope on one side, the Knight on the other. She saw that her hands were trembling. Three more cards quickly followed – another nest. King of High House Death, King in Chains, and Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy. Knight of Darkness as the inside frame. She set down the other end and gasped. The card she wished she had never made. *The Tyrant.*

Closing the field. The spiral was done. City and Tyrant at beginning and end.

Tiserra had not expected anything like this. She was not seeking prophecy – her thoughts had been centred on her husband and whatever web he had found himself trapped in – no, not prophecy, nothing on such a grand scale as this . . .

*I see the end of Darujhistan. Spirits save us, I see my city's end. This, Torvald, is your nest.*

'Oh, husband,' she murmured, 'you are in trouble indeed . . .'

Her eyes strayed once more to The Rope. *Is that you, Cotillion? Or has Vorcan returned? It's not just the Guild – the Guild means nothing here. No,*

*there are faces behind that veil. There are terrible deaths coming. Terrible deaths.* Abruptly, she swept up the cards, as if by that gesture alone she could defy what was coming, could fling apart the strands and so free the world to find a new future. As if things could be so easy. As if choices were indeed free.

Outside, a cart clunked past, its battered wheels crackling and stepping on the uneven cobbles. The hoofs of the ox pulling it beat slow as a dirge, and there came to her the rattle of a heavy chain, slapping leather and wood.

She wrapped the deck once more and returned it to its hiding place. And then went to another, this one made by her husband – perhaps indeed he'd thought to keep it a secret from her, but such things were impossible. She knew the creak of every floorboard, after all, and had found his private pit only days after he'd dug it.

Within, items folded in blue silk – the silk of the Blue Moranth. Tor's loot – she wondered again how he'd come by it. Even now, as she knelt above the cache, she could feel the sorcery roiling up thick as a stench, reeking of watery decay – the Warren of Ruse, no less, but then, perhaps not.

*This, I think, is Elder. This magic, it comes from Mael.*

*But then, what connection would the Blue Moranth have with the Elder God?*

She reached down and edged back the silk. A pair of sealskin gloves, glistening as if they had just come up from the depths of some ice-laden sea. Beneath them, a wateretched throwing axe, in a style she had never seen before – not Moranth, for certain. A sea-raider's weapon, the inset patterns on the blue iron swirling like a host of whirlpools. The handle was an ivory tusk of some sort, appallingly oversized for any beast she could imagine. Carefully tucked in to either side of the weapon were cloth-wrapped grenados, thirteen in all, one of which was – she had discovered – empty of whatever chemical incendiary was trapped inside the others. An odd habit of the Moranth, but it had allowed her a chance to examine more closely the extraordinary skill involved in manufacturing such perfect porcelain globes, without risk of blowing herself and her entire home to

pieces. True, she had heard that most Moranth munitions were made of clay, but not these ones, for some reason. Lacquered with a thick, mostly transparent gloss that was nevertheless faintly cerulean, these grenados were – to her eye – works of art, which made the destruction implicit in their proper use strike her as almost criminal.

*Now, dear husband, why do you have these? Were they given to you, or did you – as is more likely – steal them?*

If she confronted him, she knew, he would tell her the truth. But that was not something she would do. Successful marriages took as sacrosanct the possession of secrets. When so much was shared, certain other things must ever be held back. Small secrets, to be sure, but precious ones none the less.

Tiserra wondered if her husband foresaw a future need for such items. Or was this just another instance of his natural inclination to hoard, a quirk both charming and infuriating, sweet and potentially deadly (as all the best ones were).

Magic flowed in endless half-visible patterns about the porcelain globes – another detail she suspected was unusual.

*Ensorcelled munitions – what were the Blue Moranth thinking?*

Indeed, whatever were they thinking?

Two empty chairs faced Kruppe, a situation most peculiar and not at all pleasing. A short time earlier they had been occupied. Scorch and Leff, downing a fast tankard each before setting out to their place of employment, their nightly vigil at the gates of the mysterious estate and its mysterious lady. Oh, a troubled pair indeed, their fierce frowns denoting an uncharacteristic extreme of concentration. They'd swallowed down the bitter ale like water, the usual exchange of pleasant idiocies sadly muted. Watching them hurry out, Kruppe was reminded of two condemned men on the way to the gallows (or a wedding), proof of the profound unfairness of the world.

But fairness, while a comforting conceit, was an elusive notion, in the habit of swirling loose and wild about the vortex of the self, and should the

currents of one collide with those of another, why, fairness ever revealed itself as a one-sided coin. In this fell clash could be found all manner of conflict, from vast continent-spanning wars to neighbours feuding over a crooked fence line.

But what significance these philosophical meanderings? Nary effect upon the trudging ways of life, to be sure. Skip and dance on to this next scene of portentous gravity, and here arriving hooded as a vulture through the narrow portal of the Phoenix Inn, none other than Torvald Nom. Pausing just within the threshold, answering Sulty's passing greeting with a distracted smile, and then to the bar, where Meese has already poured him a tankard. And in reaching over to collect it, Torvald's wrist is grasped, Meese pulling him close for a few murmured words of possible import, to which Torvald grimaces and then reluctantly nods – his response sufficient for Meese to release him.

Thus sprung, Torvald Nom strode over to smiling Kruppe's table and slumped down into one of the chairs. 'It's all bad,' he said.

'Kruppe is stunned, dear cousin of Rallick, at such miserable misery, such pessimistic pessimism. Why, scowling Torvald has so stained his world that even his underlings have been infected. Look, even here thy dark cloud crawls darkly Kruppe's way. Gestures are necessary to ward off sour infusion!' And he waved his hand, crimson handkerchief fluttering like a tiny flag. 'Ah, that is much better. Be assured, Torvald, Kruppe's friend, that "bad" is never as bad as bad might be, even when it's very bad indeed.'

'Rallick left a message for me. He wants to see me.'

Kruppe waggled his brows and made an effort at leaning forward, but his belly got in the way so he settled back again, momentarily perturbed at what might be an expanding girth – but then, it was in truth a question of angles, and thus a modest shift in perspective eased his repose once more, thank the gods – 'Unquestionably Rallick seeks no more than a cheery greeting for his long lost cousin. There is, Kruppe proclaims, no need for worry.'

'Shows what little you know,' Torvald replied. 'I did something terrible once. Horrible, disgusting and evil. I scarred him for life. In fact, if he does track me down, I expect he'll kill me. Why d'you think I ran away in the first place?'

'A span of many years,' said Kruppe, 'weakens every bridge, until they crumble at a touch, or if not a touch, then a frenzied sledgehammer.'

'Will you speak to him for me, Kruppe?'

'Of course, yet, alas, Rallick has done something terrible and horrible and disgusting and evil to poor Kruppe, for which forgiveness is not possible.'

'What? What did he do?'

'Kruppe will think of something. Sufficient to wedge firmly the crowbar of persuasion, until he cannot but tilt helpless and desperate for succour in your direction. You need only open wide your arms, dear friend, when said moment arrives.'

'Thanks, Kruppe, you're a true friend.' And Torvald drank deep.

'No truer, no lie, 'tis true. Kruppe blesses you, alas, with none of the formal panoply accorded you by the Blue Moranth – oh, had Kruppe been there to witness such extraordinary, indeed singular, honorificals! Sulty, sweet lass, is it not time for supper? Kruppe withers with need! Oh, and perhaps another carafe of vintage—'

'Hold it,' Torvald Nom cut in, his eyes sharpening. 'What in Hood's name do you know about *that*, Kruppe? And how? Who told you – no one could've told you, because it was secret in the first place!'

'Calmly, please, calmly, Kruppe's dearest friend.' Another wave of the handkerchief, concluded by a swift mop as sweat had inexplicably sprung to brow. 'Why, rumours—'

'Not a chance.'

'Then, er, a dying confession—'

'We're about to hear one of those, yes.'

Kruppe hastily mopped some more. 'Source escapes me at the moment, Kruppe swears! Why, are not the Moranth in a flux—'

'They're *always* in a damned flux, Kruppe!'

'Indeed. Then, yes, perturbations among the Black, upon gleaning hints of said catechism, or was it investiture? Something religious, in any case—'

'It was a blessing, Kruppe.'

'Precisely, and who among all humans more deserved such a thing from the Moranth? Why, none, of course, which is what made it singular in the first place, thus arching the exoskeletal eyebrows of the Black, and no doubt the Red and Gold and Silver and Green and Pink – are there Pink Moranth? Kruppe is unsure. So many colours, so few empty slots in Kruppe's brain! Oh, spin the wheel and let's see explosive mauve flash into brilliant expostulation and why not? Yes, 'twas the Mauve Moranth so verbose and carelessly so, although not so carelessly as to reveal anything to anyone but Kruppe and Kruppe alone, Kruppe assures you. In fact, so precise their purple penchant for verbosity that even Kruppe's recollection of the specific moment is lost – to them and to Kruppe himself. Violate a Violet if you dare, but they're not telling. Nor is Kruppe!' And he squeezed out a stream of sweat from his handkerchief, off to one side, of course, which unfortunately coincided with Sulty's arrival with a plate of supper.

Thus did Kruppe discover the virtue of perspiratory reintegration, although his subsequent observation that the supper was a tad salty was not well received, not well received at all.

Astoundingly, Torvald quickly lost all appetite for his ale, deciding to leave (rudely so) in the midst of Kruppe's meal.

Proof that manners were not as they once were. But then, they never were, were they?

Hasty departure to echo Torvald Nom's flight back into the arms of his wife, out into the dusk when all paths are unobstructed, when nothing of reality intrudes with insurmountable obstacles and possibly deadly repercussions.

In a merchant house annexe down at the docks, in the second floor loft above a dusty storeroom with sawdust on the floor, a wellborn young woman straddles a once-thief on the lone narrow cot with its thin, straggly mattress, and in her eyes darkness unfolds, is revealed to the man savage and naked – raw enough to startle in him a moment of fear.

Indeed. *Fear.* At the moment, Cutter could not reach past that ephemeral chill, could not find anything specific – what Challice's eyes revealed was all-consuming, frighteningly desperate, perhaps depthless and insatiable in its need.

She was unmindful of him – he could see that. In this instant he had become a weapon on which she impaled herself, ecstatic with the forbidden, alive with betrayal. She stabbed herself again and again, transformed into something private, for ever beyond his reach, and, yes, without doubt these were self-inflicted wounds, hinting of an inwardly directed contempt, perhaps even disgust.

He did not know what to think, but there was something alluring in being faceless, in being that weapon – and this truth shivered through him as dark as all that he saw in her eyes.

*Apsalar, is this what you feared? If it is, then I understand. I understand why you fled. You did it for both of us.*

With this thought he arched, groaning, and spilled into Challice Vidikas. She gasped, lowered herself on to him. Sweat on sweat, waves of heat embracing them.

Neither spoke.

From outside, gulls cried to the dying sun. Shouts and laughter muted by walls, the faint slap of waves on the broken crockery-cluttered shore, the creak of pulleys as ships were loaded and off-loaded. From outside, the world as it always was.

Cutter was now thinking of Scillara, of how this was a kind of betrayal – no different from Challice's own. True, Scillara had said often enough that theirs was a love of convenience, unbound by expectations. She'd insisted

on that distance, and if there had been moments of uncontrolled passion in their lovemaking, it was the selfish kind, quickly plucked apart once they were both spent. He also suspected that he had hurt her – with their landing in his city, some part of him had sought to sever what they had had aboard the ship, as if by closing one chapter every thread was cut and the tale began anew.

But that wasn't possible. All breaks in the narrative of living had more to do with the limits of what could be sustained at any one time, the reach of temporary exhaustion. Memory did not let go; it remained the net dragged in one's wake, with all sorts of strange things snarled in the knotted strands.

He had behaved unfairly, and that had hurt her and, indeed, hurt their friendship. And now it seemed he had gone too far, too far to ever get back what he now realized was precious, was *truer* than everything he was feeling now, here beneath this woman.

It's said joy's quick crash was weighted in truth. All at once Challice, sprawled prone atop him, felt heavier.

In her own silence, Challice of House Vidikas was thinking back to that morning, to one of those rare breakfasts in the company of her husband. There had been sly amusement in his expression, or at least the tease of that emotion, making his every considerate gesture slightly mocking, as if in sitting facing one another at the table they were but acting out clichéd roles of propriety. And finding, it seemed, a kind of comfort in the ease of their mutual falsehoods.

She suspected that some of Gorlas's satisfaction involved a bleed-over into her private activities, as if it pleased him to take some credit for her fast-receding descent into depravity; that his unperturbed comfort was in fact supportive, something to be relied upon, a solid island she could flail back to when the storm grew too wild, when her swimming in the depths took on the characteristics of drowning.

Making her so-called private activities little more than extensions of his possession. In owning her he was free to see her used and used up elsewhere. In fact, she had sensed a sexual tension between them that had

not been there since . . . that had *never* been there before. She was, she realized, making herself more desirable to him.

It seemed a very narrow bridge that he chose to walk. Some part of her, after all, was her own – belonging to no one else no matter what they might believe – and so she would, ultimately, be guided by her own decisions, the choices she made that would serve her and none other. Yes, her husband played a most dangerous game here, as he might well discover.

He had spoken, in casual passing, of the falling out between Shardan Lim and Hanut Orr, something trivial and soon to mend, of course. But moments were strained of late, and neither ally seemed eager to speak to Gorlas about any of it. Hanut Orr had, however, said some strange things, offhand, to Gorlas in the few private conversations they'd had – curious, suggestive things, but no matter. It was clear that something had wounded Hanut Orr's vaunted ego, and that was ever the danger with possessing such an ego – its constant need to be fed, lest it deflate to the prods of sharp reality.

Sharden Lim's mood, too, had taken a sudden downward turn. One day veritably exalted, the next dour and short-tempered.

Worse than adolescents, those two. You'd think there was a woman involved . . .

Challice had affected little interest, finding, to her own surprise, that she was rather good at dissembling, at maintaining the necessary pretensions. The Mistress of the House, the pearlescent prize of the Master, ever smooth to the touch, as delicate as a porcelain statue. Indifferent to the outside world and all its decrepit, smudged details. This was the privilege of relative wealth, after all, encouraging the natural inclination to manufacture a comforting cocoon. Keeping out the common indelicacies, the mundane miseries, all those raw necessities, needs, wants, all those crude stresses that so strained the lives of normal folk.

Only to discover, in gradual increments of growing horror, that the world within was little different; that all those grotesque foibles of humanity could not be evaded – they just reared up shinier to the eye, like polished baubles, but no less cheap, no less sordid.

In her silence, Challice thought of the gifts of privilege, and oh wasn't she privileged indeed? A rich husband getting richer, one lover among his closest allies (and that was a snare she might use again, if the need arose), and now another – one Gorlas knew virtually nothing about. At least, she didn't think he did.

Sudden rapid flutter of her heart. *What if he has someone following me?* The possibility was very real, but what could she do about it? And what might her husband do when he discovered that her most recent lover was not a player in his game? That he was, in fact, a stranger, someone clearly beyond his reach, his sense of control. Would he then realize that she too was now beyond his control?

Gorlas might panic. He might, in truth, become murderous.

'Be careful now, Cro— Cutter. What we have begun is very dangerous.'

He said nothing in reply, and after a moment she pushed herself off him, and rose to stand beside the narrow bed. 'He would kill you,' she continued, looking down on him, seeing once again how the years had hardened his body, sculpted muscles bearing the scars of past battles. His eyes, fixed on her own, regarded her with thoughts and feelings veiled, unknowable.

'He's a duellist, isn't he?'

She nodded. 'One of the best in the city.'

'Duels,' he said, 'don't frighten me.'

'That would be a mistake, Cutter. In any case, given your . . . station, it's doubtful he'd bother with anything so formal. More like a half-dozen thugs hired to get rid of you. Or even an assassin.'

'So,' he asked, 'what should I do about it?'

She hesitated, and then turned away to find her clothes. 'I don't know. I was but warning you, my love.'

'I would imagine you'd be even more at risk.'

She shrugged. 'I don't think so. Although,' she added, 'a jealous man is an unpredictable man.' Turning, she studied him once more. 'Are you jealous, Cutter?'

'Of Gorlas Vidikas?' The question seemed to surprise him and she could see him thinking about it. 'Title and wealth, yes, that would be nice. Being born into something doesn't mean it's deserved, of course, so maybe he hasn't earned all his privileges, but then, maybe he has – you'd know more of that than I would.'

'That's not what I meant. When he takes me, when he makes love to me.'

'Oh. Does he?'

'Occasionally.'

'Make love? Or just make use of you?'

'That is a rather rude question.'

Years ago, he would have leapt to his feet, apologies tumbling from him in a rush. Now, he remained on the bed, observing her with those calm eyes. Challice felt a shiver of something in her, and thought it might be fear. She had assumed a certain . . . control. Over all of this. Over him. And now she wondered. 'What,' he now asked, 'do you want from me, Challice? Years and years of this? Meeting in dusty, abandoned bedrooms. Something you can own that Gorlas does not? It's not as if you'll ever leave him, is it?'

'You once invited me to run away with you.'

'If I did,' he said, 'you clearly said no. What has changed?'

'I have.'

His gaze sharpened on her. 'So now . . . you would? Leave it all behind? The estate, the wealth?' He waved languidly at the room around them. 'For a life of this? Challice, understand: the world of most people is a small world. It has more limitations than you might think—'

'And you think it's that different among the nobleborn?'

He laughed.

Fury hissed through her, and to keep from lashing out she quickly began dressing. 'It's typical,' she said, pleased at her calm tone. 'I shouldn't have been surprised. The lowborn always think we have it so easy, that we can do anything, go anywhere. That our every whim is answered. They don't think—' she spun to face him, and watched his eyes widen as he comprehended her anger, '—*you* don't think that people like me can suffer.'

'I never said that—'

'You *laughed.'*

'Where are you going now, Challice? You're going back to your home. Your estate, where your handmaids will rush to attend to you. Where another change of clothes and jewellery awaits. After a languid bath, of course.' He sat up, abruptly. 'The ship's carpenter who stayed in this room here, well, he did so because he had nowhere else to go. This was *his* estate. Temporary, dependent on the *whim* of House Vidikas, and when his reason for being here was done out he went, to find somewhere else to live – if he was lucky.' He reached for his shirt. 'And where will I go now? Oh, out on to the streets. Wearing the same clothes I arrived in, and that won't change any time soon. And tonight? Maybe I can wheedle another night in a room at the Phoenix Inn. And if I help in the kitchen I'll earn a meal and if Meese is in a good mood then maybe even a bath. Tomorrow, the same challenges of living, the same questions of "what next?"' He faced her and she saw amused irony in his expression, which slowly faded. 'Challice, I'm not saying you're somehow immune to suffering. If you were, you wouldn't be here, would you? I spoke of limited worlds. They exist everywhere, but that doesn't mean they're all identical. Some are a damned sight more limited than others.'

'You had choices, Cutter,' she said. 'More choices than I ever had.'

'You could have told Gorlas no when he sought your hand in marriage.'

'Really? Now that reveals one thing in you that's not changed – your naïveté.'

He shrugged. 'If you say so. What next, Challice?'

His sudden, seemingly effortless dismissal of the argument took her breath away. *It doesn't matter to him. None of it. Not how I feel, not how I see him.* 'I need to think,' she said, inwardly flailing.

He nodded as if unsurprised.

'Tomorrow evening,' she said, 'we should meet again.'

A half-grin as he asked, 'To talk?'

'Among other things.'

'All right, Challice.'

Some thoughts, possessing a frightening kind of self-awareness, knew to hide deep beneath others, riding unseen the same currents, where they could grow unchallenged, unexposed by any horrified recognition. One could always sense them, of course, but that was not the same as slashing through all the obfuscation, revealing them bared to the harsh light and so seeing them wither into dust. The mind ran its own shell-game, ever amused at its own sleight of hand misdirection – in truth, this was how one tended to live, from moment to moment, with the endless exchange of denials and deference and quick winks in the mirror, even as inner proclamations and avowals thundered with false willpower and posturing conviction.

Does this lead one into unease?

Challice Vidikas hurried home, nevertheless taking a circuitous route as now and then whispers of paranoia rose in faint swells to the surface of her thoughts.

She was thinking of Cutter, this man who had once been Crokus. She was thinking of the significance in the new name, the new man she had found. She was thinking, also (there, beneath the surface), of what to do with him.

Gorlas would find out, sooner or later. He might confront her, he might not. She might discover that he knew only by arriving one afternoon at the loft in the annexe, and finding Cutter's hacked, lifeless corpse awaiting her on the bed.

She knew she was trapped – in ways a free man like Cutter could never comprehend. She knew, as well, that the ways out were limited, each one chained to sacrifices, losses, abandonments, and some . . . despicable. Yes, that was the only word for them.

*Despicable.* She tasted the word anew, there in her mind. Contemplated whether she was in fact capable of living with such a penance. *But why would I? What would I need to see done, to make me see myself in that way?*

*How many lives am I willing to destroy, in order to be free?*

The question itself was despicable, the stem to freedom's blessed flower – to grasp hold was to feel the stab of countless thorns.

Yet she held tight now, riding the pain, feeling the slick blood welling up, running down. She held tight, to feel, to taste, to know what was coming . . . if . . . *if I decide to accept this.*

She could wait for Gorlas to act. Or she could strike first.

A corpse lying on the bed. A mangled rose lying on the floor.

Cutter was not Crokus – she could see that, yes, very clearly. Cutter was . . . *dangerous.* She recalled the scars, the old knife wounds, sword wounds even, perhaps. Others that might have been left by the punch of arrows or crossbolts. He had fought, he had taken lives – she was certain of it.

Not the boy he'd once been. *But this man he now is . . . can he be used? Would he even blink if I so asked?*

*Should I ask? Soon? Tomorrow?*

Thus exposed, one must recoil indeed, but these were deep-run thoughts, nowhere near the surface. They were free to flow, free to swirl round unseen, as if detached from all reality. But they weren't, were they? Detached from all reality.

Oh, no, they were not.

Does this lead one into unease?

*

On a surge of immense satisfaction, Barathol Mekhar's rather large fist smashed into the man's face, sending him flying back through the doorway of the smithy. He stepped out after him, shaking the stinging pain from his hand. 'I will be pleased to pay the Guild's annual fees, sir,' he said, 'when the Guild decides to accept my membership. As for demanding coin while denying my right to run my business, well, you have just had my first instalment.'

A smashed nose, blood pouring forth, eyes staring up from a puffiness burgeoning to swallow up his features, the Guild agent managed a feeble nod.

'You are welcome,' Barathol continued, 'to come back next week for the next one, and by all means bring a few dozen of your associates – I expect I'll be in an even more generous mood by then.'

A crowd had gathered to watch, but the blacksmith was disinclined to pay them any attention. He rather wanted word to get out, in fact, although from what he'd gathered his particular feud was already a sizzling topic of conversation, and no doubt his words just spoken would be quoted and misquoted swift as a plague on the hot winds.

Turning about, he walked back into his shop.

Chaur stood near the back door, wearing his heavy apron with its spatter of burn holes revealing the thick weave of aesgir grass insulation beneath the leather – the only plant known that did not burn, even when flung into a raging fire. Oversized gloves of the same manufacture covered his hands and forearms, and he was holding tongs that gripped a fast-cooling curl of bronze. Chaur's eyes were bright and he was smiling.

'Best get that back into the forge,' Barathol said.

As expected, business was slow. A campaign had begun, fomented by the Guild, that clearly involved the threat of a blacklist that could – and would – spread to other guilds in the city. Barathol's customers could find themselves unable to purchase things they needed from a host of other

professions, and that of course would prove devastating. And as for Barathol's own material requirements, most doors had already begun closing in his face. He was forced to seek out alternatives in the black market, never a secure option.

As his friend Mallet had predicted, Malazans resident in the city had been indifferent to all such extortions and warnings against taking Barathol's custom. There was, evidently, something in their nature that resisted the notion of threats, and in fact being told they could not do something simply raised their hackles and set alight a stubborn fire in their eyes. That such a response could prove a curse had been driven home with the slaughter at K'rul's – and the grief that followed remained deeply embedded in Barathol, producing within him a dark, cold rage. Unfortunately for the latest agent from the Guild of Blacksmiths, something of that fury had transferred itself into Barathol's instinctive reaction to the man's demand for coin.

Even so, he had not come to Darujhistan to make enemies. Yet now he found himself in a war. Perhaps more than one at that. No wonder, then, his foul mood.

He made his way into the work yard, where the heat from the two stoked forges rolled over him in a savage wave. His battle axe needed a new edge, and it might do to fashion a new sword – something he could actually wear in public.

Barathol's new life in Darujhistan was proving anything but peaceful.

Bellam Nom was, in Murillio's estimation, the only student of the duelling school worthy of the role. Fifteen years of age, still struggling with the awkwardness of his most recent growth spurt, he approached his studies with surprising determination. Even more astonishing, the lad actually *wanted* to be here.

In the prolonged absence of Stonny Menackis's attention, it had fallen to Murillio to assume most of the school's responsibilities, and he was finding this very distant relation of Rallick (and Torvald) in every respect a Nom, which alone encouraged a level of instruction far beyond what he gave the others. The young man stood before him sheathed in sweat, as the last of

the class hurried out through the compound gate, the echoes of their voices quickly fading, and Murillio sensed that Bellam was far from satisfied with the torturously slow pace of the day's session.

'Master,' he now said, 'I have heard of an exercise involving suspended rings. To achieve the perfect lunge, piercing the hole and making no contact with the ring itself—' Murillio snorted. 'Yes. Useful if you happen to be in a travelling fair or a circus. Oh, for certain, Bellam, point control is essential in fencing with the rapier – I wouldn't suggest otherwise. But as an exercise, I am afraid its value is limited.'

'Why?'

Murillio eyed the young man for a moment, and then sighed. 'Very well. The exercise requires too many constraints, few of which ever occur in the course of a real fight. You achieve point control – useful point control, I mean – when it's made integral to other exercises. When it's combined with footwork, distance, timing and the full range of defence and offence demanded when facing a real, living opponent. Spearing rings is all very impressive, but the form of concentration it demands is fundamentally *different* from the concentration necessary in a duel. In any case, you can spend the next two months mastering the art of spearing a ring, or two months mastering the art of staying alive against a skilled enemy, and not just staying alive, but presenting a true threat to that enemy, in turn.' He shrugged. 'Your choice, of course.'

Bellam Nom grinned suddenly and Murillio saw at once how much he looked like his oh-so-distant cousin. 'I still might try it – in my own time, of course.'

'Tell you what,' Murillio said. 'Master spearing a suspended ring at the close of a mistimed lunge, an off-balance recovery to your unarmed side, two desperate parries, a toe-stab to your opponent's lead foot to keep him or her from closing, and a frantic stop-thrust in the midst of a back-pedalling retreat. Do that, and I will give you my second best rapier.'

'How long do I have?'

'As long as you like, Bellam.'

'Extra time with an instructor,' said a voice from the shaded colonnade to one side, 'is not free.'

Murillio turned and bowed to Stonny Menackis.

'Mistress, we were but conversing—'

'You were giving advice,' she cut in, 'and presenting this student with a challenge. The first point qualifies as instruction. The second is an implicit agreement to extracurricular efforts on your part at some time in the future.'

Bellam's grin had broadened. 'My father, Mistress, will not hesitate to meet any extra expense, I assure you.'

She snorted, stepping out from the gloom. 'Any?'

'Within reason, yes.'

She looked terrible. Worn, old, her clothes dishevelled. If Murillio had not known better, he would judge her as being hungover, a condition of temporary, infrequent sobriety to mark an alcoholic slide into fatal oblivion. Yet he knew she was afflicted with something far more tragic. Guilt and shame, self-hatred and grief. The son she didn't want had been taken from her – to imagine that such a thing could leave her indifferent was not to understand anything at all.

Murillio said to Bellam, 'You'd best go now.'

They watched him walk away.

'Look at him,' Stonny muttered as he reached the gate, 'all elbows and knees.'

'That'll pass,' he said.

'A stage, is it?'

'Yes.' And of course he knew this particular game, the way she spoke of Harllo by not speaking of him, of the life that might await him, or the future taken away from him, stolen by her cruel denial. She would inflict this on herself again and again, at every opportunity. Seemingly innocent observations, each one a masochistic flagellation. For this to work, she

required someone like Murillio, who would stand and listen and speak and pretend that all this was normal – the back and forth and give and take, the blood pooling round her boots. She had trapped him in this role – using the fact of his adoration, his love for her – and he was no longer certain that his love could survive such abuse.

*The world is small. And getting smaller.*

He had walked the pauper pits south of the city, just outside the wall between the two main trader gates. He had looked upon scores of recent unclaimed dead. It was, in fact, becoming something of a ritual for him, and though he had only second-hand descriptions of Harllo, he did his best, since no one who knew the boy would accompany him. Not Stonny, not Myrla nor Bedek. On occasion, Murillio had been forced to descend into one of the pits to make closer examination of some small body, a soft, lime-dusted face, eyes lidded shut as if in sleep or, on occasion, scrunched in some last moment of pain, and these mute, motionless faces now paraded in his dreams at night, a procession of such sorrow that he awoke with tears streaming from his eyes.

He told Stonny none of this. He'd said nothing of how his and Kruppe's enquiries among the sailors and fisherfolk had failed to find any evidence of someone press-ganging a five-year-old boy. And that every other possible trail thus far had turned up nothing, not even a hint or remote possibility, leaving at last the grim likelihood of some fell mishap, unreported, uninvestigated – just another dead child abandoned long before death's arrival, known only in the records of found corpses as the 'twice-dead'.

'I am thinking of signing over my stakes in this school,' Stonny now said. 'To you.'

Startled, he turned to stare at her. 'I won't accept.'

'Then you'd be a fool – as if I didn't already know that. You're better suited. You're a better teacher. I barely managed any interest in this from the very start – it was always the coin – and now I find I could not care less. About the school, the students – even promising ones like Nom there. I don't care about anything, in fact.'

*Including you, Murillio.* Yes, he heard that unspoken addition without the need for her to actually say it aloud. Well, she would of course want to push him away. Much as she needed him to play those self-wounding games with her, she needed even more the solitude necessary for complete self-destruction. Isolation was more than a simple defence mechanism; it also served to prepare one for more severe punishments, possibly culminating in suicide. On another level, she would view her desire to drive him off as an act of mercy on her part. But that was a most irritating form of self-pity.

He had given his heart to the wrong woman. *Timing, Bellam Nom, is everything. With sword in hand.*

*With love in hand.*

*Oh, well. I'd figured it out with a rapier, at least.*

'Don't make that decision just yet,' he said. 'I have one more thing I can try.' *It won't be pleasant, but you don't need to know that.*

Stonny simply turned away. 'I'll see you tomorrow, then.'

Many adults, in the indurated immobility of years, acquire a fear of places they have never been, even as they long for something different in their lives, something new. But this new thing is a world of the fantastical, formless in answer to vague longings, and is as much defined by absence as presence. It is a conjuration of emotions and wishful imaginings, which may or may not possess a specific geography. Achieving such a place demands a succession of breaks with one's present situation, always a traumatic endeavour, and upon completion, why, sudden comes the fear.

Some do not choose the changes in their lives. Some changes no one in their right mind would ever choose. In K'rul's Bar, a once-soldier of the Malazan Empire stands tottering over the unconscious form of her lover, whilst behind her paces Antsy, muttering self-recriminations under his breath, interrupted every now and then with a stream of curses in a half-dozen languages.

Blend understood all that had motivated Picker to attempt what she had done. This did little to assuage her fury. The very same High Denul healer

who had just attended to her had set to a thorough examination of Picker as soon as Antsy had returned with his charge lying in the bed of a hired oxcart, only to pronounce that there was nothing to be done. Either Picker would awaken or she wouldn't. Her spirit had been torn loose and now wandered lost.

The healer had left. In the main room below, Duiker and Scillara sat in the company of ghosts and not much else.

Although still weak, Blend set out to collect her weapons and armour. Antsy followed her into the corridor.

'What're you planning?' he demanded, almost on her heels as she went into her own room.

'I'm not sure,' she replied, laying out her chain hauberk on the bed, then pulling off her shirt to find the padded undergarment.

Antsy's eyes bugged slightly as he stared at her breasts, the faint bulge of her belly, the sweet—

Blend tugged on the quilted shirt and then returned to the hauberk. 'You'll need to wrap me,' she said.

'Huh? Oh, aye. Right. But what about me?'

She regarded him for a moment. 'You want to help?'

He half snarled in reply.

'All right,' she said. 'Go find a couple of crossbows and plenty of quarrels. You're going to cover me, for as long as that's possible. We don't walk together.'

'Aye, Blend.'

She worked the hauberk over her head and pushed her arms through the heavy sleeves.

Antsy went to the equipment trunk at the foot of the bed and began rummaging through its contents, looking for the swaths of black cloth to

bind the armour close and noiseless about Blend's body. 'Gods below, woman, what do you need all these clothes for?'

'Banquets and soirées, of course.'

'You ain't never been to one in your life, woman.'

'The possibility always exists, Antsy. Yes, those ones, but make sure the drawstrings are still in them.'

'How do you expect to find the nest?'

'Simple,' she said. 'Don't know why we didn't think of it before. The name Picker said, the one that Jaghut heard.' She selected a matched pair of Wickan longknives from her store of weapons and strapped the belt on, low on her hips, offered Antsy a hard grin. 'I'm going to ask the Eel.'

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

And these things were never so precious
Listen to the bird in its cage as it speaks
In a dying man's voice; when he is gone
The voice lives to greet and give empty
Assurances with random poignancy

I do not know if I could live with that
If I could armour myself as the inhuman beak
Opens to a dead man's reminder, head cocked
As if channelling the ghost of the one
Who imagines an absence of sense, a vacuum awaiting

The cage is barred and nightly falls the shroud
To silence the commentary of impossible apostles
Spirit godlings and spanning abyss, impenetrable cloud
Between the living and the dead, the here and the gone
Where no bridge can smooth the passage of pain

And these things were never so precious
Listening to the bird as it speaks and it speaks
And it speaks, the one who has faded away
The father departed knowing the unknown
And it speaks and it speaks and it speaks
In my father's voice

*Caged Bird*
Fisher kel Tath

There was no breath to speak of. Rather, what awoke him was the smell of death, dry, an echo of pungent decay that might belong to the carcass of a beast left in the high grasses, desiccated yet holding its reek about itself, close and suffocating as a cloak. Opening his eyes, Kallor found himself staring up at the enormous, rotted head of a dragon, its massive fangs and shredded gums almost within reach.

The morning light was blotted out and it seemed the shade cast by the dragon roiled with all its centuries of forgotten breath.

As the savage thunder of Kallor's heartbeat eased, he slowly edged to one side – the dragon's viper head tilting to track his movement – and carefully stood, keeping his hands well away from the scabbarded sword lying on the ground beside his bedroll. 'I did not,' he said, scowling, 'ask for company.'

The dragon withdrew its head in a crackling of dried scales along the length of its serpent neck; settled back between the twin cowls of its folded wings.

He could see runnels of dirt trickling down from creases and joins on the creature's body. One gaunt forelimb bore the tracery of fine roots in a colourless mockery of blood vessels. From the shadowed pits beneath the gnarled brow ridges there was the hint of withered eyes, a mottling of grey and black that could hold no display of desire or intent; and yet Kallor felt that regard raw as sharkskin against his own eyes as he stared up at the undead dragon.

'You have come,' he said, 'a long way, I suspect. But I am not for you. I can give you nothing, assuming I wanted to, which I do not. And do not imagine,' he added, 'that I will bargain with you, whatever hungers you may still possess.'

He looked about his makeshift camp, saw that the modest hearth with its fistful of coals still smouldered from the previous night's fire. 'I am hungry, and thirsty,' he said. 'You can leave whenever it pleases you.'

The dragon's sibilant voice spoke in Kallor's skull. *'You cannot know my pain.'*

He grunted. 'You cannot *feel* pain. You're dead, and you have the look of having been buried. For a long time.'

*'The soul writhes. There is anguish. I am broken.'*

He fed a few clumps of dried bhederin dung on to the coals, and then glanced over. 'I can do nothing about that.'

*'I have dreamt of a throne.'*

Kallor's attention sharpened with speculation. 'You would choose a master? That is unlike your kind.' He shook his head. 'I scarcely believe it.'

*'Because you do not understand. None of you understand. So much is beyond you. You think to make yourself the King in Chains. Do not mock my seeking a master, High King Kallor.'*

'The Crippled God's days are numbered, Eleint,' said Kallor. 'Yet the throne shall remain, long after the chains have rusted to dust.'

There was silence between them then, for a time. The morning sky was clear, tinted faintly red with the pollen and dust that seemed to seethe up from this land. Kallor watched the hearth finally lick into flames, and he reached for the small, battered, blackened pot. Poured the last of his water into it and set the pot on the tripod perched above the fire. Swarms of suicidal insects darted into the flames, igniting in sparks, and Kallor wondered at this penchant for seeking death, as if the lure for an end was irresistible. Not a trait he shared, however.

*'I remember my death*,' the dragon said.

'And that's worth remembering?'

*'The Jaghut were a stubborn people. So many saw naught but the coldness in their hearts—'*

'Misunderstood, were they?'

*'They mocked your empire, High King. They answered you with scorn. It seems the wounds have not healed.'*

'A recent reminder, that's all,' Kallor replied, watching the water slowly awaken. He tossed in a handful of herbs. 'Very well, tell me your tale. I welcome the amusement.'

The dragon lifted its head and seemed to study the eastern horizon.

'Never wise to stare into the sun,' Kallor observed. 'You might burn your eyes.'

*'It was brighter then – do you recall?'*

'Perturbations of orbit, or so believed the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

*'So too the Jaghut, who were most diligent in their observations of the world. Tell me, High King, did you know they broke peace only once? In all their existence – no, not the T'lan Imass – that war belonged to those savages and the Jaghut were a most reluctant foe.'*

'They should have turned on the Imass,' Kallor said. 'They should have annihilated the vermin.'

*'Perhaps, but I was speaking of an earlier war – the war that destroyed the Jaghut long before the coming of the T'lan Imass. The war that shattered their unity, that made of their lives a moribund flight from an implacable enemy – yes, long before and long after the T'lan Imass.'*

Kallor considered that for a moment, and then he grunted and said, 'I am not well versed in Jaghut history. What war was this? The K'Chain Che'Malle? The Forkrul Assail?' He squinted at the dragon. 'Or, perhaps, you Eleint?'

There was sorrow in its tone as the dragon replied, *'No. here were some among us who chose to join in this war, to ight alongside the Jaghut armies —'*

'Armies? *Jaghut* armies?'

*'Yes, an entire people gathered, a host of singular will. Legions uncountable. Their standard was rage, their clarion call injustice. When they marched, swords beating on shields, time itself found measure, a hundred million hearts of edged iron. Not even you, High King, could*

*imagine such a sight – your empire was less than a squall to that terrible storm.'*

For once, Kallor had nothing to say. No snide comment to voice, no scoffing refutation. In his mind he saw the scene the dragon had described, and was struck mute. To have witnessed such a thing!

The dragon seemed to comprehend his awe. *'Yes again, High King. When you forged your empire, it was on the dust of that time, that grand contest, that most bold assault. We fought. We refused to retreat. We failed. We fell. So many of us fell – should we have believed otherwise? Should we have held to our faith in the righteousness of our cause, even as we came to believe that we were doomed?'*

Kallor stared across at the dragon, the tea in the pot steaming away. He could almost hear the echoes of tens of millions, hundreds of millions, dying on a plain so vast even the horizons could not close it in. He saw flames, rivers of blood, a sky solid with ash. In creating this image, he had only to draw upon his own fury of destruction, then multiply it a thousandfold. The notion took his breath, snatched it from his lungs, and his chest filled with pain. 'What,' he managed, 'who? What enemy could vanquish such a force?'

*'Grieve for the Jaghut, High King, when at last you sit on that throne. Grieve for the chains that bind all life, that you can never break. Weep, for me and my fallen kin – who did not hesitate to join a war that could not be won. Know, for ever in your soul, Kallor Eidorann, that the Jaghut fought the war no other has dared to fight.'*

'Eleint . . .'

*'Think of these people. Think of them, High King. The sacrifice they made for us all. Think of the Jaghut, and an impossible victory won in the heart of defeat. Think, and then you will come to understand all that is to come. Perhaps, then, you alone will know enough to honour their memory, the sacrifice they made for us all.*

*'High King, the Jaghut's only war, their greatest war, was against Death itself.'*

The dragon turned away then, spreading its tattered wings. Sorcery blossomed round the huge creature, and it lifted into the air.

Kallor stood, watching the Eleint rise into the cinnamon sky. A nameless dead dragon, that had fallen in the realm of Death, that had fallen and in dying had simply . . . *switched sides*. No, there could be no winning such a war. 'You damned fool,' he whispered at the fast receding Eleint. 'All of you, damned fools.' *Bless you, bless you all.*

*Gothos, when next we meet, this High King owes you an apology.*

On withered cheeks that seemed cursed to eternal dryness, tears now trickled down. He would think long and think hard, now, and he would come to feelings that he'd not felt in a long time, so long that they seemed foreign, dangerous to harbour in his soul.

And he would wonder, with growing unease, at the dead Eleint who, upon escaping the realm of Death, would now choose the Crippled God as its new master.

*A throne,* Emperor Kellanved once said, *is made of many parts.* And then he had added, *any one of which can break, to the king's eternal discomfort.* No, it did no good to simply sit on a throne, deluding oneself of its eternal solidity. He had known that long before Kellanved ever cast an acquisitive eye on empire. But he was not one for resonant quotations.

Well, everyone has a few flaws.

In a dark pool a score of boulders rise clear of the lightless, seemingly lifeless surface. They appear as islands, no two connected in any obvious way, no chain of uplifted progression to hint at some mostly submerged range of mountains, no half-curl to mark a flooded caldera. Each stands alone, a bold proclamation.

Is this how it was at the very beginning? Countless scholars struggled to make sense of it, the distinct existences, the imposition of order in myriad comprehensions. Lines were drawn, flags splashed with colours, faces blended into singular philosophies and attitudes and aspects. *Here there is Darkness, and here there is Life. Light, Earth, Fire, Shadow, Air, Water. And*

*Death.* As if such aspects began as pure entities, unstained by contact with any of the others. And as if *time* was the enemy, forcing the inevitable infections from one to another.

Whenever Endest Silann thought about these things, he found himself trapped in a prickly, uneasy suspicion. In his experience, purity was an unpleasant concept, and to imagine worlds defined by purity filled him with fear. An existence held to be pure was but the physical corollary of a point of view bound in certainty. Cruelty could thrive unfettered by compassion. The pure could see no value among the impure, after all. Justifying annihilation wasn't even necessary, since the inferiority was ever self-evident.

Howsoever all creation had begun, he now believed, those pure forms existed as nothing more than the raw materials for more worthy elaborations. As any alchemist knew, transformation was only possible as a result of admixture. For creation to thrive, there must be an endless succession of catalysts.

His Lord had understood that. Indeed, he had been driven to do all that he had done by that very comprehension. And change was, for so many, terrifying. For so much of existence, Anomander Rake had fought virtually alone. Even his brothers had but fallen, bound by the ties of blood, into the chaos that followed.

Was Kharkanas truly the first city? The first, proudest salutation to order in the cosmos? Was it in fact even true that Darkness preceded all else? What of the other worlds, the rival realms? And, if one thought carefully about that nascent age of creation, had not the admixture already begun? Was there not Death in the realms of Darkness, Light, Fire and all the rest? Indeed, how could Life and Death exist in any form of distinction without the other?

No, he now believed that the Age of Purity was but a mythical invention, a convenient separation of all the forces necessary for all existence. Yet was he not witness to the Coming of Light? To Mother Dark's wilful rejection of eternal stasis? Did he not with his own eyes see the birth of a sun over his blessed, precious city? How could he not have understood, at that moment,

how all else would follow, inevitably, inexorably? That fire would awaken, that raging winds would howl, that waters would rise and the earth crack open? That death would flood into their world in a brutal torrent of violence? That Shadow would slide between things, whispering sly subversions of all those pristine absolutes?

He sat alone in his room, in the manner of all old men when the last witness has wandered off, when nothing but stone walls and insensate furniture gathered close to mock his last few aspirations, his last dwindling reasons for living. In his mind he witnessed yet again, in a vision still sharp, still devastating, Andarist staggering into view. Blood on his hands. Blood painted in the image of a shattered tree upon his grief-wracked face – oh, the horror in his eyes could still make Endest Silann reel back, wanting none of this, this curse of witnessing—

No, better stone walls and insensate furniture. All the errors in Andarist's life, now crowding with jabbering madness in those wide, staring eyes.

Yes, he had reeled back once that stare fixed his own. Some things should never be communicated, should never be cast across to slash through the heavy curtains one raised to keep whatever was without from all that was within, slashing through and lodging deep in the soul of a defenceless witness. *Keep your pain to yourself, Andarist! He left you to this – he left you thinking you wiser than you were. Do not look so betrayed, damn you! He is not to blame!*

*I am not to blame.*

To break Shadow is to release it into every other world. Even in its birth, it had been necessarily ephemeral, an illusion, a spiral of endless, self-referential tautologies. Shadow was an argument and the argument alone was sufficient to assert its existence. To stand within was a solipsist's dream, seeing all else as ghostly, fanciful delusion, at best the raw matter to give Shadow shape, at worst nothing more than Shadow's implicit need to define itself – *Gods, what is the point of trying to make sense of such a thing? Shadow is, and Shadow is not, and to dwell within it is to be neither of one thing nor of any other.*

*And your children, dear Shadow, took upon themselves the strength of Andiian courage and Liosan piety, and made of that blend something savage, brutal beyond belief. So much for promises of glory.*

He found he was sitting with his head in his hands. History charged, assailing his weary defences. From the image of Andarist he next saw the knowing half-smile of Silchas Ruin, on the dawn when he walked to stand beside Scabandari, as if he knew what was to come, as if he was content with accepting all that followed, and doing so to spare his followers from a more immediate death – as Liosan legions ringed the horizon, soldiers singing that horrifying, haunting song, creating a music of heartbreaking beauty to announce their march to slaughter – sparing his people a more immediate death, granting them a few more days, perhaps weeks, of existence, before the Edur turned on their wounded allies on some other world.

Shadow torn, rent into pieces, drifting in a thousand directions. *Like blowing upon a flower's seed-head, off they wing into the air!*

Andarist, broken. Silchas Ruin, gone.

Anomander Rake, standing alone.

*This long. This long . . .*

The alchemist knows: the wrong catalyst, the wrong admixture, ill-conceived proportions, and all pretence of control vanishes – the transformation runs away, unchained, burgeons to cataclysm. *Confusion and fear, suspicion and then war, and war shall breed chaos. And so it shall and so it does and so it ever will.*

*See us flee, dreaming of lost peace, the age of purity and stasis, when we embraced decay like a lover and our love kept us blind and we were content. So long as we stayed entertained, we were content.*

*Look at me.*

*This is what it is to be content.*

Endest Silann drew a deep breath, lifted his head and blinked to clear his eyes. His master believed he could do this, and so he would believe his master. There, as simple as that.

Somewhere in the keep, priestesses were singing.

A hand reached up and grasped hard. A sudden, powerful pull tore loose Apsal'ara's grip and, snarling curses, she tumbled from the axle frame and thumped heavy on the sodden ground.

The face staring down at her was one she knew, and would rather she did not. 'Are you mad, Draconus?'

His only response was to grasp her chain and begin dragging her out from under the wagon.

Furious, indignant, she writhed across the mud, seeking purchase – anything to permit her to right herself, to even, possibly, resist. Stones rolled beneath the bite of her fingernails, mud grated and smeared like grease beneath her elbows, her knees, her feet. And still he pulled, treating her with scant, bitter ceremony, as if she was nothing more than a squalling cut-purse – *the outrage!*

Out from the wagon's blessed gloom, tumbling across rock-studded dirt – chains whipping on all sides, lifting clear and then falling back to track twisting furrows, lifting again as whoever or whatever was at the other end heaved forward another single, desperate step. The sound was maddening, pointless, infuriating.

Apsal'ara rolled upright, gathering a length of chain and glaring across at Draconus. 'Come closer,' she hissed, 'so I can smash your pretty face.'

His smile was humourless. 'Why would I do that, Thief?'

'To please me, of course, and I at least deserve that much from you – for dragging me out here.'

'Oh,' he said, 'I deserve many things, Apsal'ara. But for the moment, I will be content with your attention.'

'What do you want? We can do nothing to stop this. If I choose to greet my end lounging on the axle, why not?'

They were forced to begin walking, another step every few moments – much slower now, so slow the pathos stung through to her heart.

'You have given up on your chain?' Draconus asked, as if the manner in which he had brought her out here was of no import, easily dismissed now.

She decided, after a moment, that he was right. At the very least, there'd been some . . . drama. 'Another few centuries,' she said, shrugging, 'which I do not have. Damn you, Draconus, there is nothing to see out here – let me go back—'

'I need to know,' he cut in, 'when the time comes to fight, Apsal'ara – will you come to my side?'

She studied him. A well-featured man, beneath that thick, black beard. Eyes that had known malice long since stretched to snapping, leaving behind a strange bemusement, something almost regretful, almost . . . *wise*. Oh, this sword's realm delivered humility indeed. 'Why?' she demanded.

His heavy brows lifted, as if the question surprised him. 'I have seen many,' he said, haltingly, 'in my time. So many, appearing suddenly, screaming in horror, in anguish and despair. Others . . . already numbed, hopeless. Madness arrives to so many, Apsal'ara . . .'

She bared her teeth. Yes, she had heard them. Above the places where she hid. Out to the sides, beyond the incessant rains, where the chains rolled and roped, fell slack then lifted once more, where they crossed over, one wending ever farther to one side, cutting across chain after chain – as the creature at the end staggered blind, unknowing, and before too long would fall and not rise again. The rest would simply step over that motionless chain, until it stretched into the wagon's wake and began dragging its charge.

'Apsal'ara, you arrived spitting like a cat. But it wasn't long before you set out to find a means of escape. And you would not rest.' He paused, and wiped a hand across his face. 'There are so few here I have come to . . .

admire.' The smile Draconus then offered her was defenceless, shocking. 'If we must fall, then I would choose the ones at my side – yes, I am selfish to the last. And I am sorry for dragging you out here so unceremoniously.'

She walked alongside him, saying nothing. Thinking. At last, she sighed. 'It is said that only one's will can fight against chaos, that no other weapons are possible.'

'So it is said.'

She shot him a look. 'You know me, Draconus. You know . . . I have strength. Of will.'

'You will fight long,' he agreed, nodding. 'So very long.'

'The chaos will want my soul. Will seek to tear it apart, strip away my awareness. It will rage all around me.'

'Yes,' he said.

'Some of us are stronger than others.'

'Yes, Apsal'ara. Some of us are stronger than others.'

'And these you would gather close about you, that we might form a core. Of resistance, of stubborn will.'

'So I have thought.'

'To win through to the other side? Is there an *other side*, Draconus?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know,' she repeated, making the words a snarl. 'All my life,' she said, 'I have chosen to be alone. In my struggles, in my victories and my failings. Draconus, I will face oblivion in the same way. I must – we *all* must. It does nothing to stand together, for we each fall alone.'

'I understand. I am sorry, then, Apsal'ara, for all this.'

'There is no *other side*, Draconus.'

'No, probably not.'

She drew up more of her chain, settled its crushing weight on to her shoulders, and then pulled away from the man, back towards the wagon. No, she could not give him anything, not when hope itself was impossible. He was wrong to admire her. To struggle was her own madness, resisting something that could not be resisted, fighting what could not be defeated.

This foe would take her mind, her self, tearing it away piece by piece – and she might sense something of those losses, at least to begin with, like vast blanks in her memory, perhaps, or an array of simple questions she could no longer answer. But before long, such knowledge would itself vanish, and each floating fragment would swirl about, untethered, alone, unaware that it had once been part of something greater, something whole. Her life, all her awareness, scattered into frightened orphans, whimpering at every strange sound, every unseen tug from the surrounding darkness. From woman to child, to helpless babe.

She knew what was coming. She knew, too, that in the end there was a kind of mercy to that blind ignorance, to the innocence of pieces. Unknowing, the orphans would dissolve away, leaving nothing.

What mind could not fear such a fate?

'Draconus,' she whispered, although she was far from his side now, closing in on the wagon once more, 'there is no other side of chaos. Look at us. Each chained. Together, and yet alone. See us pass the time as we will, until the end. You made this sword, but the sword is only a shape given to something far beyond you, far beyond any single creature, any single *mind*. You just made it momentarily manageable.'

She slipped into the gloom behind the lead wheel. Into the thick, slimy rain.

'Anomander Rake understands,' she hissed. 'He understands, Draconus. More than you ever did. Than you ever will. The world within Dragnipur must die. That is the greatest act of mercy imaginable. The greatest sacrifice. Tell me, Draconus, would you relinquish your power? Would you crush down your selfishness, to choose this . . . this emasculation? This

sword, your cold, iron grin of vengeance – would you see it become lifeless in your hands? As dead as any other hammered bar of iron?'

She ducked beneath the lead axle and heaved the chain on her shoulders up and on to the wooden beam. Then climbed up after it. 'No, Draconus, you could not do that, could you?'

There had been pity in Rake's eyes when he killed her. There had been sorrow. But she had seen, even then, in that last moment of locked gazes, how such sentiments were tempered.

By a future fast closing in. Only now, here, did she comprehend that.

*You give us chaos. You give us an end to this.*

And she knew, were she in Anomander Rake's place, were she the one possessing Dragnipur, she would fail in this sacrifice. The power of the weapon would seduce her utterly, irrevocably.

*None other. None other but you, Anomander Rake.*

*Thank the gods.*

He awoke to the sting of a needle at the corner of one eye. Flinching back, gasping, scrabbling away over the warm bodies. In his wake, that blind artist, the mad Tiste Andii, Kadaspala, face twisted in dismay, the bone stylus drawing back.

'Wait! Come back! Wait and wait, stay and stay, I am almost done! I am almost done and I must be done before it's too late, before it's too late!'

Ditch saw that half his mangled body now bore tattoos, all down one side – wherever skin had been exposed whilst he was lying unconscious atop the heap of the fallen. How long had he been lying there, insensate, whilst the insane creature stitched him full of holes? 'I told you,' he said, 'not me. *Not me!'*

'Necessary. The apex and the crux and the fulcrum and the heart. He chose you. I chose you. Necessary! Else we are all lost, we are all lost, we are all lost. Come back. Where you were and where you were, lying just so, your arm over, the wrist – the very twitch of your eye—'

'I said *no*! Come at me again, Kadaspala, and I will choke the life from you. I swear it. I will crush your neck to pulp. Or snap your fingers, every damned one of them!'

Lying on his stomach, gaping sockets seeming to glare, Kadaspala snatched his hands back, hiding them beneath his chest. 'You must not do that and you must not do that. I was almost finished with you. I saw your mind went away, leaving me your flesh – to do what was needed and what was needed is still needed, can't you understand that?'

Ditch crawled further away, well beyond the Tiste Andii's reach, rolling and then sinking down between two demonic forms, both of which shifted sickeningly beneath his weight. 'Don't come any closer,' he hissed.

'I must convince you. I have summoned Draconus. He is summoned. There will be threats, they come with Draconus, they always come with Draconus. I have summoned him.'

Ditch slowly lowered himself down on to his back. There would be no end to this, he knew. Each time his mind fell away, fled to whatever oblivion it found, this mad artist would crawl to his side, and, blind or not, he would resume his work. *What of it? Why should I really care? This body is mostly destroyed now, anyway. If Kadaspala wants it – no, damn him, it is all I have left.*

'So many are pleased,' the Tiste Andii murmured, 'to think that they have become something greater than they once were. It is a question of sacrifices, of which I know all there is to know, yes, I know all there is to know. And,' he added, somewhat breathlessly, 'there is of course more to it, more to it. Salvation—'

'You cannot be serious.'

'It is not quite a lie, not quite a lie, my friend. Not quite a lie. And truth, well, truth is never as true as you think it is, or if it is, then not for long not for long not for long.'

Ditch stared up at the sickly sky overhead, the flashes of reflected argent spilling through what seemed to be roiling clouds of grey dust. Everything

felt imminent, something hovering at the edge of his vision. There was a strangeness in his mind, as if he was but moments from hearing some devastating news, a fatal illness no healer could solve; he knew it was coming, knew it to be inevitable, but the details were unknown and all he could do was wait. Live on in endless anticipation of that cruel, senseless pronouncement.

If there were so many sides to existing, why did grief and pain overwhelm all else? Why were such grim forces so much more powerful than joy, or love, or even compassion? And, in the face of that, did dignity really provide a worthy response? It was but a lifted shield, a display to others, whilst the soul cowered behind it, in no way ready to stand unmoved by catastrophe, especially the personal kind.

He felt a sudden hatred for the futility of things.

Kadaspala was crawling closer, his slithering stalking betrayed in minute gasps of effort, the attempts at stealth pathetic, almost comical.

*Blood and ink, ink and blood, right, Kadaspala? The physical and the spiritual, each painting the truth of the other.*

*I will wring your neck, I swear it.*

He felt motion, heard soft groans, and all at once a figure was crouching down beside him. Ditch opened his eyes. 'Yes,' he said, sneering, 'you were summoned.'

'Just how many battles, wizard, are you prepared to lose?'

The question irritated him, but then it was meant to. 'Either way, I have few left, don't I?'

Draconus reached down and dragged Ditch from between the two demons, roughly throwing him on to his stomach – no easy thing, since Ditch was not a small man, yet the muscles behind that effort made the wizard feel like a child.

'What are you doing?' Ditch demanded, as Draconus placed his hands to either side of the wizard's head, fingers lacing below his jaw.

Ditch sought to pull his head back, away from that tightening grip, but the effort failed.

A sudden wrench to one side. Something in his neck broke clean, a crunch and snap that reverberated up into his skull, a brief flare of what might have been pain, then . . . nothing.

*'What have you done?'*

'Not the solution I would have preferred,' Draconus said from above him, 'but it was obvious that argument alone would not convince you to cooperate.'

Ditch could not feel his body. Nothing, nothing at all beneath his neck. *He broke it – my neck, severed the spinal cord. He – gods! Gods!* 'Torment take you, Elder God. Torment take your soul. An eternity of agony. Death of all your dreams, sorrow unending among your kin – may they too know misery, despair – all your—'

'Oh, be quiet, Ditch. I haven't the time for this.'

The scene before Ditch's eyes rocked then, swung wild and spun, as Draconus dragged him back to where he had been lying before, to where Kadaspala needed him to be. *The apex, the crux, the heart, the whatever. You have me now, Tiste Andii.*

*And yes, I did not heed your threat, and look at me now. True and true, you might say, Ditch never learns. Not about threats. Not about risks. And no, nothing –* nothing *– about creatures such as Draconus. Or Anomander Rake. Or any of them, who do what they have to do, when it needs doing.*

'Hold your face still,' Kadaspala whispered close to one ear. 'I do not want to blind you, I do not want to blind you. You do not want to be blind, trust me, you do not want to be blind. No twitching, this is too important, too too too important and important, too.'

The stab of the stylus, a faint sting, and now, as it was the only sensation he had left, the pain shivered like a blessing, a god's merciful touch to remind him of his flesh – that it still existed, that blood still flowed beneath the skin.

*The healer, Ditch, has devastating news.*

*But you still have your dignity. You still have that.*

*Oh yes, he still has his dignity. See the calm resignation in these steady eyes, the steeled expression, the courage of no choice.*

*Be impressed, won't you?*

The south-facing slopes of God's Walk Mountains were crowded with ruins. Shattered domes, most of them elliptical in shape, lined the stepped tiers like broken teeth. Low walls linked them, although these too had collapsed in places, where run-off from the snow-clad peaks had cut trenches and gullies like gouges down the faces, as if the mountains themselves were eager to wash away the last remnants of the long dead civilization.

Water and earth will heal what needs healing. Water and earth, sun and wind, these will take away every sign of wilful assertion, of cogent imposition. Brick crumbles to rubble, mortar drifts away as grit on the breeze. These mountains, Kedeviss knew, will wash it all away.

The notion pleased her, and in these sentiments she was little different from most Tiste Andii – at least those she knew and had known. There was a secret delight in impermanence, in seeing arrogance taken down, whether in a single person or in a bold, proud civilization. Darkness was ever the last thing to remain, in the final closing of eyelids, in the unlit depths of empty buildings, godless temples. When a people vanished, their every home, from the dishevelled hovel of the destitute to the palaces of kings and queens, became nothing but a sepulchre, a tomb host to nothing but memories, and even these quickly faded.

She suspected that the dwellers of the village, there at the foot of the nearest mountain, on the edge of a lake in headlong retreat, knew nothing about the sprawling city whose ruins loomed above them. A convenient source of cut stone and oddly glazed bricks and nothing more. And of course, whatever little knowledge they had possessed, they had surrendered it all to saemankelyk, for it was clear as the troupe drew closer that the village was lifeless, abandoned.

Against the backdrop of the mountains, the figure of Clip – striding well ahead of the rest of them – looked appropriately diminished, like an ant about to tackle a hillside. Despite this, Kedeviss found her gaze drawn to him again and again. *I'm not sure. Not sure about him.* Distrust came easy, and even had Clip been all smiles and eager generosity, still she would have her suspicions. They'd not done well with strangers, after all.

'I have never,' said Nimander as he walked at her side, 'seen a city like that.'

'They certainly had a thing about domes,' observed Skintick behind them. 'But let's hope that some of those channels still run with fresh water. I feel salted as a lump of bacon.'

Crossing the dead lake had been an education in human failure. Long lost nets tangled on deadheads, harpoons, anchors, gaffs and more shipwrecks than seemed reasonable. The lake's death had revealed its treachery in spiny ridges and shoals, in scores of mineralized tree trunks, still standing from the day some dam high in the mountains broke to send a deluge sweeping down into a forested valley. Fisher boats and merchant scows, towed barges and a few sleek galleys attesting to past military disputes, the rusted hulks of armour and other things less identifiable – the lake bed seemed a kind of concentrated lesson on bodies of water and the fools who dared to navigate them. Kedeviss imagined that, should a sea or an ocean suddenly drain away to nothing, she would see the same writ large, a clutter of loss so vast as to take one's breath away. What meaning could one pluck free from broken ambition? *Avoid the sea. Avoid risks. Take no chances. Dream of nothing, want less.* An Andiian response, assuredly. Humans, no doubt, would draw down into thoughtful silence, thinking of ways to improve the odds, of turning the battle and so winning the war. For them, after all, failure was temporary, as befitted a short-lived species that didn't know any better.

'I guess we won't be camping in the village,' Skintick said, and they could see that Clip had simply marched through the scatter of squatting huts, and was now attacking the slope.

'He can walk all night if he likes,' Nimander said. 'We're stopping. We need the rest. Water, a damned bath. We need to redistribute our supplies, since there's no way we can take the cart up and over the mountains. Let's hope the locals just dropped everything like all the others did.'

*A bath. Yes. But it won't help. We cannot clean our hands, not this time.*

They passed between sagging jetties, on to the old shore by way of a boat-launch ramp of reused quarry stones, many of which had been carved with strange symbols. The huts rested on solid, oversized foundations, the contrast between ancient skill and modern squalor so pathetic it verged on the comical, and Kedeviss heard Skintick's amused snort as they wended their way between the first structures.

A rectangular well dominated the central round, with more perfectly cut stone set incompetently in the earth to form a rough plaza of sorts. Discarded clothing and bedding was scattered about, bleached by salt and sun, like the shrunken remnants of people.

'I seem to recall,' Skintick said, 'a child's story about flesh-stealers. Whenever you find clothes lying on the roadside and in glades, it's because the stealers came and took the person wearing them. I never trusted that story, though, since who would be walking round wearing only a shirt? Or one shoe? No, my alternative theory is far more likely.'

Nimander, ever generous of heart, bit on the hook. 'Which is?'

'Why, the evil wind, of course, ever desperate to get dressed in something warm, but nothing ever fits so the wind throws the garments away in a fit of fury.'

'You were a child,' Kedeviss said, 'determined to explain everything, weren't you? I don't really recall, since I stopped listening to you long ago.'

'She stabs deep, Nimander, this woman.'

Nenanda had drawn up the cart and now climbed down, stretching out the kinks in his back. 'I'm glad I'm done with that,' he said.

Moments later Aranatha and Desra joined them.

*Yes, here we are again. With luck, Clip will fall into a crevasse and never return.*

Nimander looked older, like a man whose youth has been beaten out of him. 'Well,' he said with a sigh, 'we should search these huts and find whatever there is to find.'

At his command the others set out to explore. Kedeviss remained behind, her eyes still on Nimander, until he turned about and regarded her quizzically.

'He's hiding something,' she said.

He did not ask whom she meant, but simply nodded.

'I'm not sure why he feels the need for us, 'Mander. Did he want worshippers? Servants? Are we to be his cadre in some political struggle to come?'

A faint smile from Nimander. 'You don't think, then, he collected us out of fellowship, a sense of responsibility – to take us back . . . to our "Black-Winged Lord"?'

'Do you know,' she said, 'he alone among us has never met Anomander Rake. In a sense, he's not taking us to Anomander Rake. We're taking *him.'*

'Careful, Kedeviss. If he hears you you will have offended his self-importance.'

'I may end up offending more than that,' she said.

Nimander's gaze sharpened on her.

'I mean to confront him,' she said. 'I mean to demand some answers.'

'Perhaps we should all—'

'No. Not unless I fail.' She hoped he wouldn't ask for her reasons on this, and suspected, as she saw his smile turn wry, that he understood. A challenge by all of them, with Nimander at the forefront, could force into the open the power struggle that had been brewing between Clip and Nimander, one that was now played out in gestures of indifference and even

contempt – on Clip's part, at any rate, since Nimander more or less maintained his pleasant, if slightly morbid, passivity, fending off Clip's none too subtle attacks as would a man used to being under siege. Salvos could come from any direction, after all. *So carry a big shield, and keep smiling.*

She wondered if Nimander even knew the strength within him. He could have become a man such as Andarist had been – after all, Andarist had been more of a father to him than Anomander Rake had ever been – and yet Nimander had grown into a true heir to Rake, his only failing being that he didn't know it. And perhaps that was for the best, at least for the time being.

'When?' he asked now.

She shrugged. 'Soon, I think.'

A thousand paces above the village, Clip settled on one of the low bridging walls and looked down at the quaintly sordid village below. He could see his miserable little army wandering about at the edges of the round, into and out of huts.

They were, he decided, next to useless. If not for concern over them, he would never have challenged the Dying God. Naturally, they were too ignorant to comprehend that detail. They'd even got it into their heads that they'd saved his life. Well, such delusions had their uses, although the endless glances his way – so rank with hopeful expectation – were starting to grate.

He spun the rings. *Clack-clack . . . clack-clack . . .*

*Oh, I sense your power, O Black-Winged Lord. Holding me at bay. Tell me, what do you fear? Why force me into this interminable walk?*

The Liosan of old had it right. Justice was unequivocal. Explanations revealed the cowardice at the core of every criminal, the whining expostulations, the series of masks each one tried on and discarded in desperate succession. The *not-my-fault* mask. The *it-was-a-mistake* mask. *You-don't-understand* and *see-me-so-helpless* and *have-pity-I'm-weak* – he could see each expression, perfectly arranged round eyes equally perfect in

their depthless pit of self-pity (*come in there's room for everyone*). Mercy was a flaw, a sudden moment of doubt to undermine the vast, implacable structure that was true justice. The masks were meant to stir awake that doubt, the last chance of the guilty to squirm free of proper retribution.

Clip had no interest in pity. Acknowledged no flaws within his own sense of justice. The criminal depends upon the compassion of the righteous and would use that compassion to evade precisely everything that that criminal deserved. Why would any sane, righteous person fall into such a trap? It permitted criminals to thrive (since they played by different rules and would hold no pity or compassion for those who might wrong *them*). No, justice must be pure. Punishment left sacrosanct, immune to compromise.

He would make it so. For his modest army, for the much larger army to come. His people. The Tiste Andii of Black Coral. *We shall rot no longer. No more dwindling fires, drifting ashes, lives wasted century on century – do you hear me, O Lord? I will take your people, and I will deliver justice.*

*Upon this world.*

*Upon every god and ascendant who ever wronged us, betrayed us, scorned us.*

*Watch them reel, faces bloodied, masks awry, the self-pity in their eyes dissolving – and in its place the horror of recognition. That there is no escape this time. That the end has arrived, for every damned one of them.*

Yes, Clip had read his histories. He knew the Liosan, the Edur, he knew all the mistakes that had been made, the errors in judgement, the flaws of compassion. He knew, too, the true extent of the Black-Winged Lord's betrayal.

Of Mother Dark, of all the Tiste Andii. *Of those you left in the Andara. Of Nimander and his kin.*

*Your betrayal, Anomander Rake, of me.*

The sun was going down. The rings clacked and clacked, and clacked. Below, the salt pan was cast in golden light, the hovels crouched on the near shoreline blessed picturesque by distance and lack of detail. Smoke from a

cookfire now rose from their midst. Signs of life. Flames to beat back the coming darkness. But it would not last. It never lasted.

The High Priestess pushed the plate away. 'That's it,' she said. 'Any more and I will burst.' A first level acolyte ducked in to take the plate, scurrying off with such haste that she almost spilled the towering heap of cracked crayfish shells.

Leaning back, the High Priestess wiped the melted butter from her fingers. 'It's typical,' she said to the half-dozen sisters seated at the table, 'the nets drag up a sudden, unexpected bounty, and what do we do? Devour it entire.'

'Kurald Galain continues to yield surprises,' said the Third Sister, 'why not expect more to come?'

'Because, dearest, nothing lasts for ever. Surrounding Kharkanas, there once stood forests. Until we chopped them down.'

'We were young—'

'And that would be a worthy defence,' the High Priestess cut in, 'if we have not, here in our old age, just repeated the stupidity. Look at us. Come the morrow all our clothes will cease to fit. We will discover, to our horror, bulges where none existed before. We see pleasure as an excuse for all manner of excess, but it is a most undisciplined trait. Now, sermon ended. Someone pour the tea.'

More first level acolytes slithered in.

A rustling of small bells at the corridor door preceded the arrival of a temple guardian. The woman, clad in scale armour and ringed leather, marched up to halt beside the High Priestess. She lowered the grille face-piece on her helm and leaned close to whisper – lips unseen and so unreadable by any – a brief message.

The High Priestess nodded, and then gestured the guardian away. 'Second and Third Sister, remain in your seats. You others, take your tea to the Unlit Garden. Sixth Sister, once there you can stop hiding that flask and top up everyone else, yes?'

Moments later, only three women remained in the chamber, as even the acolytes had been sent away.

The door opened again and the guardian reappeared, this time escorting an old woman, human, who tottered on two canes to support her massive weight. Sweat darkened the cloth of her loose clothing round her armpits and beneath her cleavage and on the bulging islands of her hips. Her expression was one of anxiety and discomfort.

Unbidden, Third Sister rose and pulled a bench away from one wall, positioning it in the woman's path.

'Please do sit,' said the High Priestess, thinking, alas, of the two dozen blind crayfish she'd just eaten, each almost half the size of a lobster, served up drenched in melted butter. *Pleasure until pain, and we then rail at our misfortune.*

With muttered thanks, the woman lowered herself on to the bench. 'Please to introduce myself,' she said in a wheeze. 'I am the Witch—'

'I know,' the High Priestess interrupted, 'and that title will suffice here, as must my own. Yours has been a trying journey, and so I can only assume you come with word of a crisis.'

A quick nod. 'The cult of the Redeemer, High Priestess, has become . . . corrupted.'

'And what is the agency of that corruption?'

'Well, but that is complicated, you see. There was a High Priestess – oh, she was a reluctant owner of that title, and all the duties that came with it. Yet none could deny her natural authority—'

'"Natural authority",' said the High Priestess. 'I like that phrase. Sorry, do go on.'

'Outlaws have usurped the pilgrim camp. There is some concentrated form of the drink called kelyk – I do not know if you are familiar with it?'

'We are, yes.'

Another quick nod. 'Saemankelyk. The word comes from a dialect common south of God's Walk Mountains. "Saeman" means "Dying God" and "kelyk" means—' 'Blood.'

A sigh. 'Yes.'

Second Sister cleared her throat, and then said, 'Surely you do not mean to suggest that the meaning is literal?'

The witch licked her lips – an instinctive gesture rather than anything ironic – and said, 'I have applied some . . . arts, er, to examining this saemankelyk. There are unnatural properties, that much is certain. In any case, the outlaws have made addicts of the pilgrims. Including Salind, the Redeemer's High Priestess.'

Third Sister spoke. 'If this foul drink is in any way blessed, then one might well see its poisonous influence as a corruption of the Redeemer's worshippers. If one kneels before saemankelyk . . . well, one cannot kneel before *two* masters, can one?'

*Not without physically splitting in half, no.* 'Witch, what is it you wish of us?'

'This corruption, High Priestess. It could . . . spread.'

Silence round the table.

It was clear now to the High Priestess that the witch had given this meeting considerable thought, until arriving at the one suggestion she considered most likely to trigger alarm. *As if we Tiste Andii are but taller, black-skinned versions of humans. As if we could so easily be . . . stolen away.*

Emboldened, the witch resumed. 'High Priestess, Salind – she needs help. We need help. There was a warrior, one among you, but he has disappeared. Now that Seerdomin is dead, I sought to find him. Spinnock Durav.'

The High Priestess rose. 'Come with me, Witch,' she said. 'Just you and me. Come, it's not far.'

The old woman levered herself upright, confusion in her small eyes.

To a side passage, a narrow corridor of twenty paces, and then down a short flight of stairs, the air still smelling of fresh-chiselled basalt, into a large but low-vaulted octagonal chamber devoid of any furniture, the floor of which was inlaid with onyx tesserae, irregular in shape and size. A journey of but a few moments for most people; yet for the witch it was an ordeal, striking the High Priestess with the poignancy of the old woman's desperation – that she should so subject herself to such a struggle. The trek from her home through the city to the keep must have been an epic undertaking.

These thoughts battered at the High Priestess's impatience, and so she weathered the delay saying nothing and without expression on her smooth, round face.

As soon as the witch tottered into the chamber, she gasped.

'Yes, you are clearly an adept,' observed the High Priestess. 'There are nodes of power in this temple. Kurald Galain, the cleansing darkness.' She could see that the witch was breathing hard and fast, and there was a look of wonder on that sweat-sheathed face. 'Do not be alarmed at what you feel inside,' she said. 'By entering here, you have drawn Kurald Galain into your body, in your breaths, through the very pores of your skin. The sorcery is now within you.'

'B-but . . . why? Why have you done this to me?'

'I could sense the labouring of your heart, Witch. Your trek to my temple would have been your last—'

'Oh, I knew that!' snapped the witch.

The sudden irritation shocked the High Priestess for a moment. She reassessed this woman tottering before her. 'I see. Then . . .'

'Then *yes*, I prayed my sacrifice would be worth it. Salind is so precious – what has been done to her is despicable. Is . . . *evil.'*

'Then you have not come in the name of the Redeemer, have you?'

'No. I came for a friend.'

*A friend.* 'Witch, Spinnock Durav is no longer in Black Coral. It grieves me to hear of Seerdomin's death. And it grieves me more to learn of Salind's fate. Tell me, what else are you feeling?'

The witch was hunched over, as if in visceral pain. 'Fine,' she hissed reluctantly. 'I can see that there is no risk of the poison spreading. I never thought there was.'

'I know that,' said the High Priestess, her voice soft.

'But I needed to bargain for your help.'

'That is ever the assumption among you humans. Do you know, when the delegates from the Free Cities came to treat with us, when the Rhivi and the man who pretended to be Prince K'azz D'Avore of the Crimson Guard came to us – they all thought to bargain. To buy our swords, our power. To *purchase* our alliance. Lord Anomander Rake but lifted one hand – before any of them could even so much as say one beseeching word. And he said this: "We are the Tiste Andii. Do not seek to bargain with us. If you wish our help, you will ask for it. We will say yes or we will say no.

There will be no negotiations."' The witch was staring across at her.

The High Priestess sighed. 'It is not an easy thing for a proud man or woman, to simply *ask.'*

'No,' whispered the witch. 'It's not.'

Neither spoke then for a dozen heartbeats, and then the witch slowly straightened. 'What have you done to me?'

'I expect Kurald Galain has done its assessment. Your aches are gone, yes? Your breathing has eased. Various ailments will disappear in the next few days. You may find your appetite . . . diminished. Kurald Galain prefers forces in balance.'

The witch's eyes were wide.

The High Priestess waited.

'I did not ask for such things.'

'No. But it did not please me to realize that your journey to my temple would prove fatal.'

'Oh. Then, thank you.'

The High Priestess frowned. 'Am I not yet understood?'

'You are,' replied the witch, with another flash of irritation, 'but I have my own rules, and I will voice my gratitude, whether it pleases you or not.'

That statement earned a faint smile and the High Priestess dipped her head in acknowledgement.

'Now, then,' said the witch after yet another brief stretch of silence, 'I ask that you help Salind.'

'No.'

The witch's face darkened.

'You have come here,' said the High Priestess, 'because of a loss of your own faith. Yes, you would have the Temple act on behalf of Salind. It is our assessment that Salind does not yet need our help. Nor, indeed, does the Redeemer.'

'Your . . . assessment?'

'We are,' said the High Priestess, 'rather more aware of the situation than you might have believed. If we must act, then we will, if only to pre-empt Silanah – although, I admit, it is no easy thing attempting to measure out the increments of an Eleint's forbearance. She could stir at any time, at which point it will be too late.'

'Too late?'

'Yes, for Salind, for the usurpers, for the pilgrim camp and all its inhabitants.'

'High Priestess, who is Silanah? And what is an Eleint?'

'Oh, I am sorry. That was careless of me. Silanah commands the spire of this keep – she is rather difficult to miss, even in the eternal gloom. On your

return to your home, you need but turn and glance back, and up, of course, and you will see her.' She paused, and then added, 'Eleint means dragon.'

'Oh.'

'Come, let us return to the others. I am sure more tea has been brewed, and we can take some rest there.'

The witch seemed to have run out of commentary, and now followed meekly as the High Priestess strode from the chamber.

The return journey did not take nearly as long.

It should have come as no surprise to Samar Dev when Karsa Orlong rode back into the camp at dusk at the end of the third day since leaving them. Riding in, saying nothing, looking oddly thoughtful.

Unscathed. As if challenging the Hounds of Shadow was no greater risk than, say, herding sheep, or staring down a goat (which, of course, couldn't be done – but such a detail would hardly stop the Toblakai, would it? And he'd win the wager, too). No, it was clear that the encounter had been a peaceful one – perhaps predicated on the Hounds' fleeing at high speed, tails between their legs.

Slipping down from Havok's back, Karsa walked over to where sat Samar Dev beside the dung fire. Traveller had moved off thirty or so paces, as it was his habit to attend to the arrival of dusk in relative solitude.

The Toblakai crouched down. 'Where is the tea?' he asked.

'There isn't any,' she said. 'We've run out.'

Karsa nodded towards Traveller. 'This city he seeks. How far away?'

Samar Dev shrugged. 'Maybe a week, since we're going rather slowly.'

'Yes. I was forced to backtrack to find you.' He was silent for a moment, looking into the flames, and then he said, 'He does not seem the reluctant type.'

'No, you're right. He doesn't.'

'I'm hungry.'

'Cook something.'

'I will.'

She rubbed at her face, feeling the scrape of calluses from her hands, and then tugged at the knots in her hair. 'Since meeting you,' she said, 'I have almost forgotten what it is to be clean – oh, Letheras was all right, but we were pretty much in a prison, so it doesn't really count. No, with you it's just empty wastelands, blood-soaked sands, the occasional scene of slaughter.'

'You sought me out, witch,' he reminded her.

'I delivered your horse.' She snorted. 'Since you two are so clearly perfect for each other, it was a matter of righting the cosmic balance. I had no choice.'

'You just want me,' he said, 'yet whenever we are together, you do nothing but second-guess everything. Surrender, woman, and you can stop arguing with yourself. It has been a long time since I spilled my seed into a woman, almost as long as since you last felt the heat of a man.'

She could have shot back, unleashed a flurry of verbal quarrels that would, inevitably, all bounce off his impervious barbarity. 'You'd be gentle as a desert bear, of course. I'd probably never recover.'

'There are sides of me, witch, that you have not seen, yet.'

She grunted.

'You are ever suspicious of being surprised, aren't you?'

A curious question. In fact, a damned tangle of a question. She didn't like it. She didn't want to go near it. 'I was civilized, once. Content in a proper city, a city with an underground sewer system, with Malazan aqueducts and hot water from pipes. Hallways between enclosed gardens and the front windows to channel cool air through the house. Proper soap to keep clothes clean. Songbirds in cages. Chilled wine and candied pastries.'

'The birds sing of imprisonment, Samar Dev. The soap is churned by indentured workers with bleached, blistered hands and hacking coughs. Outside your cool house with its pretty garden there are children left to wander in the streets. Lepers are dragged to the edge of the city and every step is cheered on by a hail of stones. People steal to eat and when they are caught their hands are cut off. Your city takes water from farms and plants wither and animals die.'

She glared across at him. 'Nice way to turn the mood, Karsa Orlong.'

'There was a mood?'

'Too subtle, was it?'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'Speak your desires plain.'

'I was doing just that, you brainless bhederin. Just a little . . . comfort. That's all. Even the illusion would have served.'

Traveller returned to the fire. 'We are about to have a guest,' he said.

Samar Dev rose and searched round, but darkness was fast swallowing the plain. She turned with a query on her lips, and saw that Karsa had straightened and was looking skyward, to the northeast. And there, in the deepening blue, a dragon was gliding towards them.

'Worse than moths,' Traveller muttered.

'Are we about to be attacked?'

He glanced at her, and shrugged.

'Shouldn't we at least scatter or something?'

Neither warrior replied to that, and after a moment Samar Dev threw up her hands and sat down once more beside the fire. No, she would not panic. Not for these two abominations in her company, and not for a damned dragon, either. Fine, let it be a single pass rather than three – what was she, an ant? She picked up another piece of dung and tossed it into the fire. *Moths? Ah, I see. We are a beacon, are we, a wilful abrogation of this wild,*

*empty land. Whatever. Flap flap on over, beastie, just don't expect scintillating discourse.*

The enormous creature's wings thundered as the dragon checked its speed a hundred paces away, and then it settled almost noiselessly on to the ground. Watching it, Samar Dev's eyes narrowed. 'That thing's not even alive.'

'No,' Karsa and Traveller said in unison.

'Meaning,' she continued, 'it shouldn't be here.'

'That is true,' Traveller said.

In the gloom the dragon seemed to regard them for a moment, and then, in a blurring dissolution, the creature *sembled*, until they saw a tall, gaunt figure of indeterminate gender. Grey as cobwebs and dust, pallid hair long and ropy with filth, wearing the remnants of a long chain hauberk, unbelted. An empty, splintered scabbard hung from a baldric beneath the right arm. Leggings of some kind of thick hide, scaled and the hue of forest loam, reached down to grey leather boots that rose to just below the knees.

No light was reflected from the pits of its eyes. It approached with peculiar caution, like a wild animal, and halted at the very edge of the firelight. Whereupon it lifted both hands, brought them together into a peak before its face, and bowed.

In the native tongue of Ugari, it said, 'Witch, I greet you.'

Samar Dev rose, shocked, baffled. Was it some strange kind of courtesy, to address her first? Was this thing in the habit of ignoring ascendants as if they were nothing more than bodyguards? And from her two formidable companions, not a sound.

'And I greet you in return,' she managed after a moment.

'I am Tulas Shorn,' it said. 'I scarce recall when I last walked this realm, if I ever have. The very nature of my demise is lost to me, which, as you might imagine, is proving disconcerting.'

'So it would, Tulas Shorn. I am Samar Dev—'

'Yes, the one who negotiates with spirits, with the sleeping selves of stream and rock, crossroads and sacred paths. Priestess of Burn—'

'That title is in error, Tulas Shorn—'

'Is it? You are a witch, are you not?'

'Yes, but—'

'You do not reach into warrens, and so force alien power into this world. Your congress is with the earth, the sky, water and stone. You are a priestess of Burn, chosen among those of whom she dreams, as are others, but you, Samar Dev, she dreams of often.'

'How would you know that?'

Tulas Shorn hesitated, and then said, 'There is death in dreaming.'

'You are Tiste Edur,' said Karsa Orlong, and, baring his teeth, he reached for his sword.

'More than that,' said Traveller, 'one of Hood's own.'

Samar Dev spun to her two companions. 'Oh, really! Look at you two! Not killed anything in weeks – how can you bear it? Planning on chopping it into tiny pieces, are you? Well, why not fight for the privilege first?'

Traveller's eyes widened slightly at her outburst.

Karsa's humourless smile broadened. 'Ask it what it wants, then, witch.'

'The day I start taking orders from you, Karsa Orlong, I will do just that.'

Tulas Shorn had taken a step back. 'It seems I am not welcome here, and so I shall leave.'

But Samar Dev's back was up, and she said, 'I welcome you, Tulas Shorn, even if these ones do not. If they decide to attack you, I will stand in their way. I offer you all the rights of a guest – it's my damned fire, after all, and if these two idiots don't like it they can make their own, preferably a league or two away.'

'You are right,' Traveller said. 'I apologize. Be welcome, then, Tulas Shorn.'

Karsa shrugged. 'I suppose,' he said, 'I've killed enough Edur. Besides, this one's already dead. I still want to know what it wants.'

Tulas Shorn edged in warily – a caution that seemed peculiarly out of place in a corpse, especially one that could veer into a dragon at any moment. 'I have no urgent motivations, Tartheno Toblakai. I have known solitude for too long and would ease the burden of being my only company.'

'Then join us,' Karsa said, returning to crouch at the fire. 'After all,' he added, 'perhaps one day I too will tire of my own company.'

'Not any time soon, I would wager,' said the Tiste Edur.

Traveller snorted a laugh, and then looked shocked at himself.

Samar Dev settled down once more, thinking of Shorn's words. *'There is death in dreaming*.' Well, she supposed, there would be at that. Then why did she feel so . . . rattled? *What were you telling me, Tulas Shorn?*

'Hood has released you?' Traveller asked. 'Or was he careless?'

'Careless?' The Tiste Edur seemed to consider the word. 'No, I do not think that. Rather, an opportunity presented itself to me. I chose not to waste it.'

'So now,' said Traveller, eyes fixed on the withered face enlivened only by reflected firelight, 'you wing here and there, seeking what?'

'Instinct can set one on a path,' Tulas Shorn said, 'with no destination in mind.' It raised both hands and seemed to study them. 'I have thought to see life once more, awakened within me. I do not know if such a thing is even possible. Samar Dev, is such a thing possible? Can she dream me alive once more?'

'Can she – what? I don't know. Call me a priestess if you like, but I don't worship Burn, which doesn't make me a very good priestess, does it? But if she dreams death, then she dreams life, too.'

'From one to the other is generally in one direction only,' Traveller observed. 'Hood will come for you, Tulas Shorn; sooner or later, he will come to reclaim you.'

For the first time, she sensed evasiveness in the Tiste Edur as it said, 'I have time yet, I believe. Samar Dev, there is sickness in the Sleeping Goddess.'

She flinched. 'I know.'

'It must be expunged, lest she die.'

'I imagine so.'

'Will you fight for her?'

'I'm not a damned priestess!' She saw the surprise on the faces of Karsa and Traveller, forced herself back from the ragged edge of anger. 'I wouldn't know where to start, Tulas Shorn.'

'I believe the poison comes from a stranger's pain.'

'The Crippled God.'

'Yes, Samar Dev.'

'Do you actually think it can be healed?'

'I do not know. There is physical damage and then there is spiritual damage. The former is more easily mended than the latter. He is sustained by rage, I suspect. His last source of power, perhaps his only source of power whilst chained in this realm.'

'I doubt he's in the negotiating mood,' Samar Dev said. 'And even if he was, he's anathema to the likes of me.'

'It is an extraordinary act of courage,' said Tulas Shorn, 'to come to know a stranger's pain. To even consider such a thing demands a profound dispensation, a willingness to wear someone else's chains, to taste their suffering, to see with one's own eyes the hue cast on all things – the terrible stain that is despair.' The Tiste Edur slowly shook its head. 'I have no such courage. It is, without doubt, the rarest of abilities.'

None spoke then for a time. The fire ate itself, indifferent to witnesses, and in its hunger devoured all that was offered it, again and again, until night and the disinterest of its guests left it to starve, until the wind stirred naught but ashes.

If Tulas Shorn sought amiable company, it should have talked about the weather.

In the morning, the undead Soletaken was gone. And so too were Traveller's and Samar Dev's horses.

'That was careless of us,' Traveller said.

'He was a guest,' Samar Dev said, baffled and more than a little hurt by the betrayal. They could see Havok, standing nervously some distance off, as if reluctant to return from his nightlong hunting, as if he had been witness to something unpleasant.

There was, however, no sign of violence. The picket stakes remained where they had been pounded into the hard ground.

'It wanted to slow us down,' Traveller said. 'One of Hood's own, after all.'

'All right,' Samar Dev glared across at a silent Karsa Orlong, 'the fault was all mine. I should have left you two to chop the thing to bits. I'm sorry.'

But Karsa shook his head. 'Witch, goodwill is not something that needs an apology. You were betrayed. Your trust was abused. If there are strangers who thrive on such things, they will ever remain strangers – because they have no other choice. Pity Tulas Shorn and those like it. Even death taught it nothing.'

Traveller was regarding the Toblakai with interest, although he ventured no comment.

Havok was trotting towards them. Karsa said, 'I will ride out, seeking new mounts – or perhaps the Edur simply drove your beasts off.'

'I doubt that,' Traveller said.

And Karsa nodded, leaving Samar Dev to realize that he had offered the possibility for her sake, as if in some clumsy manner seeking to ease her self-recrimination. Moments later, she understood that it had been anything but clumsy. It was not her inward chastisement that he spoke to; rather, for her, he was giving Tulas Shorn the benefit of the doubt, although Karsa possessed no doubt at all – nor, it was clear, did Traveller.

*Well then, I am ever the fool here. So be it.* 'We'd best get walking, then.'

In setting out, they left behind a cold hearth ringed in stones, and two saddles.

*

Almost two leagues away, high in the bright blue sky, Tulas Shorn rode the freshening breeze, the tatters of his wings rapping in the rush of air.

As he had suspected, the trio had made no effort to hunt down the lost horses. Assuming, as they would, that the dragon had simply obliterated the animals.

Tulas Shorn had known far too much death, however, to so casually kill innocent creatures. No, instead, the dragon had taken them, one in each massive clawed foot, ten leagues to the south, almost within sight of a small, wild herd of the same species – one of the last such wild herds on the plain.

Too many animals were made to bow in servitude to a succession of smarter, crueller masters (and yes, those two traits went together). Poets ever wailed upon witnessing fields of slaughter, armies of soldiers and warriors frozen in death, but Tulas Shorn – who had walked through countless such scenes – reserved his sorrow, his sense of tragedy, for the thousands of dead and dying horses, war dogs, the oxen trapped in yokes of siege wagons mired in mud or shattered, the beasts that bled and suffered through no choice of their own, that died in a fog of ignorance, all trust in their masters destroyed.

The horse knows faith in the continuation of care from its master; that food and water will be provided, that injuries will be mended, that the stiff

brush will stroke its hide at day's end. And in return it serves as best it can, or at least as best it chooses. The dog understands that the two-legged members of its pack cannot be challenged, and believes that every hunt will end in success. These were truths.

A master of beasts must be as a parent to a host of unruly but trusting children. Stolid, consistent, never wanton in cruelty, never unmindful of the faith in which he or she is held. Oh, Tulas Shorn was not unaware of the peculiarity of such convictions, and had been the subject of mockery even among fellow Tiste Edur.

Although such mockery had invariably faded when they had seen what had been achieved by this strange, quiet warrior with the Eleint-tainted eyes.

Gliding high above the Lamatath Plain, now scores of leagues south of the witch and her companions, Tulas Shorn could taste something in the air, so ancient, so familiar, that if the dragon had still possessed functioning hearts, why, they would have thundered. Pleasure, perhaps even anticipation.

How long had it been?

Long.

What paths did they now wander down?

Alien ones, to be sure.

Would they remember Tulas Shorn? The first master, the one who had taken them raw and half-wild and taught them the vast power of a faith that would never know betrayal?

*They are close, yes.*

*My Hounds of Shadow.*

If he'd had a single moment, a lone instant of unharried terror, Gruntle might have conjured in his mind a scene such as might be witnessed from someone in a passing ship – some craft beyond the raging storm, at the very

edge of this absurd insanity. Hands gripping the ratlines, deck pitching wild in the midst of a dishevelled sea, and there, yes . . . *something impossible.*

An enormous carriage thrashing through a heaving road of foam, frenzied horses ploughing through swollen, whipped waves. And figures, clinging here and there like half-drowned ticks, and another, perched high on the driver's bench behind the maddened animals, from whom endless screams pealed forth, piercing the gale and thunder and surge. Whilst on all sides the storm raged on, as if in indignant fury; the winds howled, rain slashing the air beneath bulging, bruised clouds; and the sea rose up in a tumult, spray erupting in tattered sheets.

Yes, the witness might well stare, agape. Aghast.

But Gruntle had no opportunity for such musing, no sweet luxury of time to disconnect his mind's eye from this drenched, exhausted and battered body strapped tight to the roof of the carriage, this careering six-wheeled island that seemed ever tottering on the edge of obliteration. To draw one more breath was the only goal, the singular purpose of existence. Nothing else was remotely relevant.

He did not know if he was the last one left – he had not opened his eyes in an eternity – and even if he was, why, he knew he would not hold out much longer. He convulsed yet again, but there was nothing left in his stomach – gods, he had never felt so sick in all his life.

The wind tore at his hair – he'd long since lost his helm – savage as clawed fingers, and he ducked lower. Those unseen fingers then grabbed a handful and pulled his head up.

Gruntle opened his eyes and found himself staring into a crazed face, the features so twisted that he could not for a moment recognize who was accosting him – some lost sailor from a drowned ship? Flung aboard the carriage as gods rolled in helpless laughter? – but no, it was Faint, and that expression was not abject terror. It was wild, gut-wrenching hilarity.

She tugged on the rings attached to the iron rails and managed to pull herself yet closer, enough to dip her head down beside his, and in the half-

sheltered cave their arms created her voice seemed to come from his own skull. 'I thought you were dead! So pale, like a damned cadaver!'

And this left her convulsed with laughter? 'I damn well wish I was!' he shouted back.

'We've known worse!'

Now, he'd heard that a dozen times since this venture began, and he had begun to suspect it was one of those perfect lies that people voiced to stay sane no matter what madness they found themselves in. 'Has Quell ever done anything like this before?'

'Like what? This is the Trygalle Trade Guild, shareholder! *This is what we do, man!'*

And when she began laughing again, he planted a hand on her head and pushed her away. Faint retreated, back along the rail, and Gruntle was alone once more.

How long had it been? Days. Weeks. Decades. He desperately needed fresh water – whatever rain reached his face was as salty as the sea. He could feel himself weakening – even could he find something to eat, he would never hold it down. Outrageous, to think that he could die here, body flopping about on its straps, slowly torn apart by the storm. Not with a weapon in hand, not with a defiant bellow tearing loose from his throat. Not drenched in hot blood, not staring his killer in the eye.

This was worse than any demise he might imagine. As bad as some unseen disease – the sheer helplessness of discovering that one's own body could fail all on its own. He could not even roar to the heavens with his last breath – the gesture would flood his mouth, leave him choking, defiance flung straight back at him, right back down his own throat.

More screaming – laughter? No, this was *screaming.*

*What now?*

Gruntle snatched a breath and then looked up.

Walls of water on all sides – he flinched – and then a swell heaved them skyward, the carriage twisting, pitching. Rings squealed as he was tossed up, until sharp, savage tugs from the straps snatched him back down.

But he had seen – yes – all his companions – their wide eyes, their gaping mouths – and he had seen, too, the object of their terror.

They were racing, faster than any wave, straight for a towering cliff-face.

*'Land ho!'* shrieked Glanno Tarp from his perch.

Explosions of foam at the cliff's base appeared with every lift of the waves. Jagged spires of black rock, reefs, shoals and all those other names for killers of people and ships. And carriages. All looming directly ahead, a third of a league away and closing fast.

*Can those horses climb straight up a cliff-face? Sounds ridiculous – but I won't put it past them. Not any more.*

*Even so, why is everyone screaming?*

A moment later Gruntle had his answer. Another upward pitch, and this time he twisted round and glanced back, into their wake – no reason, at least, he didn't think there was, but the view, surely, could not be as horrifying as what lay ahead.

And he saw another wall of water, this one high as a damned mountain.

Its sickly green flank picked up the carriage and then the horses, and began carrying them into the sky. So fast that the water streamed from the roof, from every flattened shareholder, and even the rain vanished as higher they went, into the gut of the clouds.

He thought, if he dared open his eyes, he would see stars, the ferment above, to the sides, and indeed below – but Gruntle's nerve had failed him. He clung, eyes squeezed shut, flesh dry and shivering in the bitter cold of the wind.

More sound than a mortal brain could comprehend – thunder from beneath, animal squeals and human shrieks, the swollen thrash of blood in every vein, every artery, the hollow howl of wind in his gaping mouth.

Higher, and higher still—

And wasn't there a cliff dead ahead?

He could not look.

Everyone thought that Reccanto Ilk was the one with the bad eyes, and that was a most pleasing misindirection as far as Glanno Tarp was concerned. Besides, he was fine enough with things within, oh, thirty or so paces. Beyond that, objects acquired a soft-edged dissolidity, became blocks of vague shape, and the challenge was in gauging the speed at which they approached, and, from this, their distance and relative size. The carriage driver had taken this to a fine art indeed, with no one the wiser.

Which, in this instance at least, was of no help at all.

He could hear everyone screaming behind him, and he was adding plenty all on his own, even as the thought flashed in his mind that Reccanto Ilk was probably shrieking in ignorance – simply because everyone else was – but the looming mass of the rotted cliff-face was a most undenimissable presence, and my how big it was getting! The horses could do naught but run, what must have seemed downhill for the hapless beasts, even as the wave's surge reared ever higher – all sorts of massomentum going on here, Glanno knew, and no quibblering about it, either.

What with pitch and angle and cant and all that, Glanno could now see the top of the cliff, a guano-streaked lip all wavy and grimacing. Odd vertical streaks depended down from the edge – what were those? Could it be? Ladders? How strange.

Higher still, view expandering, the sweep of the summit, flat land, and globs of glimmering light like melted dollops of murky wax. Something towering, a spire, a tower – yes, a towering tower, with jagged-teeth windows high up, blinking in and out – all directly opposite now, almost level—

Something pounded the air, pounded right into his bones, rattling the roots of his insipid or was it inspired grin – something that tore the wave apart, an

upward charging of spume, a world splashed white, engulfing the horses, the carriage, and Glanno himself.

His mouth was suddenly full of seawater. His eyes stared through stinging salt. His ears popped like berries between finger and thumb, *ploop ploop*. And oh, that hurt!

The water rushed past, wiping clean the world – and there, before him – were those buildings?

Horses were clever. Horses weren't half blind. They could find something, a street, a way through, and why not? Clever horses.

'Yeaagh!' Glanno thrashed the reins.

Equine shrills.

The wheels slammed down on to something hard for the first time in four days.

And, with every last remnant of axle grease scrubbed away, why, those wheels locked up, a moment of binding, and then the carriage leapt back into the air, and Glanno's head snapped right and left at the flanking blur of wheels spinning past at high speed.

Oh.

When the carriage came back down again, the landing was far from smooth.

Things exploded. Glanno and the bench he was strapped to followed the horses down a broad cobbled street. Although he was unaware of it at the time, the carriage behind them elected to take a sharp left turn on to a side street, just behind the formidable tower, and, skidding on its belly, barrelled another sixty paces down the avenue before coming to a rocking rest opposite a squat gabled building with a wooden sign swinging wildly just above the front door.

Glanno rode the bench this way and that, the reins sawing at his fingers and wrists, as the horses reached the end of the rather short high street, and boldly leapt, in smooth succession, a low stone wall that, alas, Glanno could

not quite manage to clear on his skidding bench. The impact shattered all manner of things, and the driver found himself flying through the air, pulled back down as the horses, hoofs hammering soft ground, drew taut the leather harness, and then whipped him round as they swung left rather than leaping the next low stone wall – and why would they? They had found themselves in a corral.

Glanno landed in deep mud consisting mostly of horse shit and piss, which was probably what saved his two legs, already broken, from being torn right off. The horses came to a halt beneath thrashing rain, in early evening gloom, easing by a fraction the agony of his two dislocated shoulders, and he was able to roll mostly on to his back, to lie unmoving, the rain streaming down his face, his eyes closed, with only a little blood dripping from his ears.

Outside the tavern, frightened patrons who had rushed out at the cacophony in the street now stood getting wet beneath the eaves, staring in silence at the wheelless carriage, from the roof of which people on all sides seemed to be falling, whereupon they dragged themselves upright, bleary eyes fixing on the tavern door, and staggered whenceforth inside. Only a few moments afterwards, the nearest carriage door opened with a squeal, to unleash a gush of foamy seawater, and then out stumbled the occupants, beginning with a gigantic tattooed ogre.

The tavern's patrons, one and all, really had nothing to say.

Standing in the highest room of the tower, an exceedingly tall, bluish-skinned man with massive, protruding tusks, curved like the horns of a ram to frame his bony face, slowly turned away from the window, and, taking no notice of the dozen servants staring fixedly at him – not one of whom was remotely human – he sighed and said, 'Not again.'

The servants, reptilian eyes widening with comprehension, then began a wailing chorus, and this quavering dirge reached down through the tower, past chamber after chamber, spiralling down the spiral staircase and into the crypt that was the tower's hollowed-out root. Wherein three women, lying motionless on stone slabs, each opened their eyes. And as they did so, a crypt that had been in darkness was dark no longer.

From the women's broad, painted mouths there came a chittering sound, as of chelae clashing behind the full lips. A conversation, perhaps, about hunger. And need. And dreadful impatience.

Then the women began shrieking.

High above, in the topmost chamber of the tower, the man winced upon hearing those shrieks, which grew ever louder, until even the fading fury of the storm was pushed down, down under the sea's waves, there to drown in shame.

In the tavern in the town on the coast called the Reach of Woe, Gruntle sat with the others, silent at their table, as miserable as death yet consumed with shaky relief. Solid ground beneath them, dry roof overhead. A pitcher of mulled wine midway between.

At the table beside them, Jula and Amby Bole sat with Precious Thimble – although she was there in flesh only, since everything else had been battered senseless – and the two Bole brothers were talking.

'The storm's got a new voice. You hear that, Jula?'

'I hear that and I hear you, Amby. I hear that in this ear and I hear you in that ear, and they come together in the middle and make my head ache, so if you shut up then one ear's open so the sound from the other can go right through and sink into that wall over there and that wall can have it, 'cause I don't.'

'You don't – hey, where'd everyone go?'

'Down into that cellar – you ever see such a solid cellar door, Amby? Why, it's as thick as the ones we use on the pits we put wizards in, you know, the ones nobody can open.'

'It was you that scared 'em, Jula, but look, now we can drink even more and pay nothing.'

'Until they all come back out. And then you'll be looking at paying a whole lot.'

'I'm not paying. This is a business expense.'

'Is it?'

'I bet. We have to ask Master Quell when he wakes up.'

'He's awake, I think.'

'He don't look awake.'

'Nobody does, exceptin' us.'

'Wonder what everyone's doing in the cellar. Maybe there's a party or something.'

'That storm sounds like angry women.'

'Like Mother, only more than one.'

'That would be bad.'

'Ten times bad. You break something?'

'Never did. You did.'

'Someone broke something, and those mothers are on the way. Sounds like.'

'Sounds like, yes.'

'Coming fast.'

'Whatever you broke, you better fix it.'

'No way. I'll just say you did it.'

'I'll say I did it first – no, you did it. I'll say you did it first.'

'I didn't do—'

But now the shrieking storm was too loud for any further conversation, and to Gruntle's half-deadened ears it did indeed sound like voices. Terrible, inhuman voices, filled with rage and hunger. He'd thought the storm was waning; in fact, he'd been certain of it. But then everyone had fled into the cellar—

Gruntle lifted his head.

At precisely the same time that Mappo did.

Their eyes met. And yes, both understood. *That's not a storm.*

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My finest student? A young man, physically perfect. To look upon him was to see a duellist by any known measure. His discipline was a source of awe; his form was elegance personified. He could snuff a dozen candles in successive lunges, each lunge identical to the one preceding it. He could spear a buzzing fly. Within two years I could do nothing more for him for he had passed my own skill.

I was, alas, not there to witness his first duel, but it was described to me in detail. For all his talent, his perfection of form, for all his precision, his muscle memory, he revealed one and only one flaw.

He was incapable of fighting a real person. A foe of middling skill can be profoundly dangerous, in that clumsiness can surprise, ill-preparation can confound brilliant skills of defence. The very unpredictability of a real opponent in a life and death struggle served my finest student with a final lesson.

It is said the duel lasted a dozen heartbeats. From that day forward, my philosophy of instruction changed. Form is all very well, repetition ever essential, but actual blood-touch practice must begin within the first week of instruction. To be a duellist, one must duel. The hardest thing to teach is how to survive.

Trevan Ault
2nd century, Darujhistan

Gather close, and let us speak of nasty little shits. Oh, come now, we are no strangers to the vicious demons in placid disguises, innocent eyes so wide, hidden minds so dark. Does evil exist? Is it a force, some deadly possession that slips into the unwary? Is it a thing separate and thus subject to accusation and blame, distinct from the one it has used? Does it flit from soul to soul, weaving its diabolical scheme in all the unseen places, snarling

into knots tremulous fears and appalling opportunity, stark terrors and brutal self-interest?

Or is the dread word nothing more than a quaint and oh so convenient encapsulation of all those traits distinctly lacking moral context, a sweeping generalization embracing all things depraved and breathtakingly cruel, a word to define that peculiar glint in the eye – the voyeur to one's own delivery of horror, of pain and anguish and impossible grief?

Give the demon crimson scales, slashing talons. Tentacles and dripping poison. Three eyes and six slithering tongues. As it crouches there in the soul, its latest abode in an eternal succession of abodes, may every god kneel in prayer.

But really. Evil is nothing but a word, an objectification where no objectification is necessary. Cast aside this notion of some external agency as the source of inconceivable inhumanity – the sad truth is our possession of an innate proclivity towards indifference, towards deliberate denial of mercy, towards disengaging all that is moral within us.

But if that is too dire, let's call it evil. And paint it with fire and venom.

There are extremities of behaviour that seem, at the time, perfectly natural, indeed reasonable. They are arrived at suddenly, or so it might seem, but if one looks the progression reveals itself, step by step, and that is a most sad truth.

Murillio walked from the duelling school, rapier at his hip, gloves tucked into his belt. Had he passed anyone who knew him they might be forgiven for not at first recognizing him, given his expression. The lines of his face were drawn deep, his frown a clench, as if the mind behind it was in torment, sick of itself. He looked older, harder. He looked to be a man in dread of his own thoughts, a man haunted by an unexpected reflection in a lead window, a silvered mirror, flinching back from his own face, the eyes that met themselves with defiance.

Only a fool would have stepped directly into this man's path.

In his wake, a young student hesitated. He had been about to call out a greeting to his instructor; but he had seen Murillio's expression, and, though young, the student was no fool. Instead, he set out after the man.

Bellam Nom would not sit in any god's lap. Mark him, mark him well.

There had been fervent, breathless discussion. Crippled Da was like a man reborn, finding unexpected reserves of strength to lift himself into the rickety cart, with Myrla, her eyes bright, fussing over him until even he slapped her hands away.

Mew and Hinty stared wide-eyed, brainless as toddlers were, faces like sponges sucking in everything and understanding none of it. As for Snell, oh, it was ridiculous, all this excitement. His ma and da were, he well knew, complete idiots. Too stupid to succeed in life, too thick to realize it.

They had tortured themselves and each other over the loss of Harllo, their mutual failure, their hand-in-hand incompetence that made them hated even as they wallowed in endless self-pity. Ridiculous. Pathetic. The sooner Snell was rid of them the better, and at that thought he eyed his siblings once again. If Ma and Da just vanished, why, he could sell them both and make good coin. They weren't fit for much else. Let someone else wipe their stinking backsides and shove food into their mouths – damned things choked half the time and spat it out the other half, and burst into tears at the lightest poke.

But his disgust was proving a thin crust, cracking as terror seethed beneath, the terror born of remote possibilities. Da and Ma were going to a temple, a new temple, one devoted to a god as broken and useless as Bedek himself. The High Priest, who called himself a prophet, was even more crippled. Nothing worked below his arms, and half his face sagged and the eye on that side had just dried up since the lids couldn't close and now it looked like a rotten crab apple – Snell had seen it for himself, when he'd stood at the side of the street watching as the Prophet was being carried by his diseased followers to the next square, where he'd croak out yet another sermon predicting the end of the world and how only the sick and the stupid would survive.

No wonder Da was so eager. He'd found his god at last, one in his own image, and that was usually the way, wasn't it? People don't change to suit their god; they change their god to suit them.

Da and Ma were on their way to the Temple of the Crippled God, where they hoped to speak to the Prophet himself. Where they hoped to ask the god's blessing. Where they hoped to discover what had happened to Harllo.

Snell didn't believe anything would come of that. But then, he couldn't be sure, could he? And that was what was scaring him. What if the Crippled God knew about what Snell had done? What if the Prophet prayed to it and was told the truth, and then told Da and Ma? Snell might have to run away. But he'd take Hinty and Mew with him, selling them off to get some coin, which he'd need and need bad. Let someone else wipe their stinking . . .

*Yes, Ma, I'll take care of them. You two go, see what you can find out.*

Just look at them, so filled with hope, so stupid with the idea that something else will solve all their problems, swipe away their miseries. The Crippled God: how good can a god be if it's crippled? If it can't even heal itself? That Prophet was getting big crowds. Plenty of useless people in the world, so that was no surprise. And they all wanted sympathy. Well, Snell's family deserved sympathy, and maybe some coin, too. And a new house, all the food they could eat and all the beer they could drink. In fact, they deserved maids and servants, and people who would think for them, and do everything that needed doing.

Snell stepped outside to watch Ma wheeling Da off down the alley, clickety-click.

Behind him Hinty was snuffling, probably getting ready to start bawling since Ma was out of sight and that didn't happen often. Well, he'd just have to shut the brat up. A good squeeze to the chest and she'd just pass out and things would get quiet again. Maybe do that to both of them. Make it easier wrapping them up in some kind of sling, easier to carry in case he decided to run.

Hinty started crying.

Snell spun round and the runt looked at him and her crying turned into shrieks.

'Yes, Hinty,' Snell said, grinning, 'I'm coming for ya. I'm coming for ya.'

And so he did.

Bellam Nom had known that something was wrong, terribly so. The atmosphere in the school was sour, almost toxic. Hardly conducive to learning about duelling, about everything one needed to know about staying alive in a contest of blades.

On a personal, purely selfish level, all this was frustrating, but one would have to be an insensitive bastard to get caught up in that kind of thinking. The problem was, something had broken Stonny Menackis. Broken her utterly. And that in turn had left Murillio shattered, because he loved her – no doubt about that, since he wouldn't have hung around if he didn't, not with the way she was treating him and everyone else, but especially him.

It hadn't been easy working out what was wrong, since nobody was talking much, but he'd made a point of lingering, standing in shadows as if doing little more than cooling himself off after a bell's worth of footwork in the sunlight. And Bellam Nom had sharp ears. He also had a natural talent, one it seemed he had always possessed: he could read lips. This had proved useful, of course. People had a hard time keeping secrets from Bellam.

Master Murillio had reached some sort of decision, and walked as one driven now, and Bellam quickly realized that he did not need to employ any stealth while trailing him – an entire legion of Crimson Guard could be marching on the man's heels and he wouldn't know it.

Bellam was not certain what role he might be able to play in whatever was coming. The only thing that mattered to him was that he be there when the time came.

Mark him well. These are the thoughts of courage, unquestioning and uncompromising, and this is how heroes come to be. Small ones. Big ones. All kinds. When drama arrives, they are there. Look about. See for yourself.

He seemed such an innocuous man, so aptly named, and there was nothing in this modest office that might betray Humble Measure's ambitions, nor his bloodthirsty eagerness in making use of Seba Krafar and his Guild of Assassins.

Harmless, then, and yet Seba found himself sweating beneath his nondescript clothes. True, he disliked appearing in public, particularly in the light of day, but that unease barely registered when in the presence of the Master Ironmonger.

*It's simple. I don't like the man. And is that surprising? Despite the fact that he's provided the biggest contract I've seen, at least as head of the Guild. Probably the Malazan offer Vorcan took on was bigger, but only because achieving it was impossible, even for that uncanny bitch.*

Seba's dislike was perhaps suspect, even to his own mind, since it was caught up in the grisly disaster of Humble Measure's contract. Hard to separate this man from the scores of assassins butchered in the effort (still unsuccessful) to kill those damned Malazans. And this particular subject was one that would not quite depart, despite Humble Measure's casual, dismissive wave of one soft hand.

'The failing is of course temporary,' Seba Krafar said. 'Hadn't we best complete it, to our mutual satisfaction, before taking on this new contract of yours?'

'I have reconsidered the K'rul Temple issue, at least for the moment,' said Humble Measure. 'Do not fear, I am happy to add to the original deposit commensurate with the removal of two of the subjects, and should the others each fall in turn, you will of course be immediately rewarded. As the central focus, however, I would be pleased if you concentrated on the new one.'

Seba Krafar was never able to meet anyone's gaze for very long. He knew that most would see that as a weakness, or as proof that Seba could not be trusted, but he always made a point of ensuring that what he had to say was never evasive. This blunt honesty, combined with the shying eyes, clearly

unbalanced people, and that was fine with Seba. Now, if only it worked on this man. 'This new one,' he ventured, 'is political.'

'Your specialty, I gather,' said Humble Measure.

'Yes, but one that grows increasingly problematic. The noble class has learned to protect itself. Assassinations are not as easy as they once were.'

The Ironmonger's brows lifted. 'Are you asking for more money?'

'Actually, no. It's this: the Guild is wounded. I've had to promote a dozen snipes months ahead of their time. They're not ready – oh, they can kill as efficiently as anyone, but most of them are little more than ambitious thugs. Normally, I would cull them, ruthlessly, but at the moment I can't afford to.'

'This will require, I assume, certain modifications to your normal tactics.'

'It already has. Fifteen of my dead from K'rul's Bar were my latest promotions. That's left the rest of them rattled. An assassin without confidence is next to useless.'

Humble Measure nodded. 'Plan well and execute with precision, Master Krafar, and that confidence will return.'

'Even that won't be enough, unless we succeed.'

'Agreed.'

Seba was silent for a moment, still sweating, still uneasy. 'Before I accept this latest contract,' he said, 'I should offer you a way out. There are other, less bloody ways of getting elected to the Council. It seems money is not a problem, and given that—' He stopped when the man lifted a hand.

Suddenly, there was something new in Humble Measure's eyes, something Seba had not seen before, and it left him chilled. 'If it was my desire to buy my way on to the Council, Master Krafar, I would not have summoned you here. That should be obvious.'

'Yes, I suppose—'

'But I have summoned you, yes? Therefore, it is reasonable to assume my desires are rather more complicated than simply gaining a seat on the

Council.'

'You want this particular councillor dead.'

Humble Measure acknowledged this with a brief closing of his eyes that somehow conveyed a nod without his having to move his head. 'We are not negotiating my reasons, since they are none of your business and have no relevance to the task itself. Now, you will assault this particular estate, and you will kill the councillor and everyone else, down to the scullery maid and the terrier employed to kill rats.'

Seba Krafar looked away (but then, he'd been doing that on and off ever since he'd sat down). 'As you say. Should be simple, but then, these things never are.'

'Are you saying that you are not up to this?'

'No, I'm saying that I have learned to accept that nothing is simple, and the simpler it looks the more complicated it probably is. Therefore, this will need careful planning. I trust you are not under any pressure to get on to the Council in a hurry? There're all kinds of steps needed in any case, sponsorships or bloodline claims, assessment of finances and so on . . .' He fell silent after, in a brief glance, he noted the man's level look. Seba cleared his throat, and then said, 'Ten days at the minimum. Acceptable?'

'Acceptable.'

'Then we're done here.'

'We are.'

'The deposition provided us by the Malazan embassy is unacceptable.'

Councillor Coll fixed a steady regard on Hanut Orr's smooth-shaven face, and saw nothing in it but what he had always seen. Fear, contempt, misdirection and outright deceit, the gathered forces of hatred and spite. 'So you stated,' he replied. 'But as you can see, the meeting has finished. I do my best to leave matters of the Council in the chamber. Politicking is a habit that can fast run away with you, Councillor.'

'I do not recall seeking your advice.'

'No, just my allegiance. Of the two, you elected the wrong one, Councillor.'

'I think not, since it is the only relevant one.'

'Yes,' Coll smiled, 'I understood you well enough. Now, if you will excuse me—'

'Their explanation for why they needed to expand the embassy is flimsy – are you so easily duped, Councillor Coll? Or is it just a matter of filling your purse to buy your vote?'

'Either you are offering to bribe me, Councillor Orr, or you are suggesting that I have been bribed. The former seems most unlikely. Thus, it must be the latter, and since we happen to be standing in the corridor, with others nearby – close enough to hear you – you leave me no choice but to seek censure.'

Hanut Orr sneered. 'Censure? Is that the coward's way of avoiding an actual duel?'

'I accept that it is such a rare occurrence that you probably know little about it. Very well, for the benefit of your defence, allow me to explain.'

A dozen or more councillors had now gathered and were listening, expressions appropriately grave.

Coll continued, 'I hereby accept your accusation as a formal charge. The procedure now is the engagement of an independent committee that will begin investigating. Of course, said investigation is most thorough, and will involve the detailed auditing of both of our financial affairs – yes, accuser and accused. Such examination inevitably . . . propagates, so that all manner of personal information comes to light. Once all pertinent information is assembled, my own advocates will review your file, to determine whether a countercharge is appropriate. At this point, the Council Judiciary takes over proceedings.'

Hanut Orr had gone somewhat pale.

Coll observed him with raised brows. 'Shall I now seek censure, Councillor?'

'I was not suggesting you were taking bribes, Councillor Coll. And I apologize if my carelessness led to such an interpretation.'

'I see. Were you then offering me one?'

'Of course not.'

'Then, is our politicking done here?'

Hanut Orr managed a stiff bow, and then whirled off, trailed after a moment by Shardan Lim and then, with studied casualness, young Gorlas Vidikas.

Coll watched them depart.

Estraysian D'Arle moved to his side and, taking him by the arm, led him towards a private alcove – the ones designed precisely for extra-chamber politicking. Two servants delivered chilled white wine and then quickly departed.

'That was close,' Estraysian murmured.

'He's young. And stupid. A family trait? Possibly.'

'There was no bribe, was there?'

Coll frowned. 'Not as such. The official reasons given are just as Orr claimed. Flimsy.'

'Yes. And he was not privy to the unofficial ones.'

'No. Wrong committee.'

'Hardly an accident. That ambitious trio's been given places on every meaningless committee we can think of – but that's not keeping them busy enough, it seems. They still find time to get in our way.'

'One day,' said Coll, 'they will indeed be as dangerous as they think they are.'

Outside the building, standing in the bright sun, the three ambitious young councillors formed a sort of island in a sea of milling pigeons. None took note of the cooing on all sides.

'I'll have that bastard's head one day,' said Hanut Orr.

'On a spike outside my gate.'

'You were careless,' said Shardan Lim, doing little to disguise his contempt.

Stung, Orr's gloved hand crept to the grip of his rapier. 'I've had about enough of you, old friend. It's clear you inherited every mewling weakness of your predecessor. I admit I'd hoped for something better.'

'Listen to you two,' said Gorlas Vidikas. 'Bitten by a big dog so here you are snapping at each other, and why? Because the big dog's *too* big. If he could see you now.'

Hanut Orr snorted. 'So speaks the man who can't keep his wife on a tight enough leash.'

Was the perfect extension of the metaphor deliberate? Who can say? In any case, to the astonishment of both Orr and Lim, Gorlas Vidikas simply smiled, as if appreciative of the riposte. He made a show of brushing dust from his cuffs. 'Well then, I will leave you to . . . whatever, as I have business that will take me out of the city for the rest of the day.'

'That Ironmonger will never get on the Council, Vidikas,' Shardan Lim said. 'There's no available seat and that situation's not likely to change any time soon. This partnership of yours will take you nowhere and earn you nothing.'

'On the contrary, Shardan. I am getting *wealthy.* Do you have any idea how essential iron is to this city? Ah, I see that such matters are beneath you both. So be it. As a bonus, I am about to acquire a new property in the city as well. It has been and will continue to be a most rewarding partnership. Good day to you, sirs.'

There was no denying Seba Krafar's natural air of brutality. He was a large, bearish man, and though virtually none of the people he pushed past while crossing the market's round knew him for the Master of the Assassins' Guild, they none the less quickly retreated from any confrontation; and if any might, in their own natural belligerence, consider a bold challenge to this rude oaf, why, a second, more searching glance disavowed them of any such notions.

He passed through the press like a heated knife through pig fat, a simile most suited to his opinion of humanity and his place within it. One of the consequences of this attitude, however, was that his derisive regard led to a kind of arrogant carelessness. He took no notice whatsoever of the nondescript figure who fell into his wake.

The nearest cellar leading down into the tunnels was at the end of a narrow, straight alley that led to a dead end. The steps to the cellar ran along the back of the last building on the left. The cellar had once served as a storage repository for coal, in the days before the harnessing of gas – back when the notion of poisoning one's own air in the name of brainless convenience seemed reasonable (at least to people displaying their lazy stupidity with smug pride). Now, the low-ceilinged chamber squatted empty and sagging beneath three levels of half-rotted tenement rooms in symbolic celebration of modernity.

From the shutterless windows babies cried to the accompaniment of clanking cookware and slurred arguments, sounds as familiar to Seba Krafar as the rank air of the alley itself. His thoughts were busy enough to justify his abstracted state. Fear warred with greed in a mutual, ongoing exchange of masks which were in fact virtually identical, but never mind that; the game was ubiquitous enough, after all. Before too long, in any case, the two combatants would end up supine with exhaustion. Greed usually won, but carried fear on its back.

So much for Seba Krafar's preoccupations. Even without them, it was unlikely he would have heard the one on his trail, since that one possessed unusual talents, of such measure that he was able to move up directly behind the Master Assassin, and reach out with ill intent.

A hand closed on Seba's neck, fingers like contracting claws of iron pressing nerves that obliterated all motor control, yet before the assassin could collapse (as his body wanted to do) he was flung halfway round and thrown up against a grimy stone wall. And held there, moccasined feet dangling.

He felt a breath along one cheek, and then heard whispered words.

'Pull your watchers off K'rul's Bar. When I leave here, you will find a small sack at your feet. Five councils. The contract is now concluded – I am buying it out.' The tip of a knife settled beneath Seba's right eye. 'I trust five councils is sufficient. Unless you object.'

'No, not at all,' gasped Seba. 'The Malazans are safe – at least from the Guild. Of course, that just means the client will seek, er, other means.'

'Yes, about your client.'

'I cannot—'

'No need to, Seba Krafar. I am well aware of the Master Ironmonger's particular obsession.'

'Lucky you,' Seba said in a growl – gods, whoever this was still held him off the ground, and that grip did not waver. 'Because,' he added – for he was still a brave man – 'I'm not.'

'If you were,' said the man, 'you would not be so eager to take his coin, no matter how much he offered.'

'Since you put it that way, perhaps those five councils down there could buy him an accident.'

'Generous offer, but suicidal on your part. No, I do not hire people to do my dirty work.'

Through gritted teeth – feeling was returning to his limbs, like sizzling fire – Seba said, 'So I've gathered.'

'We're done here,' the man said.

'Unless you've other pressing business,' Seba managed, and felt a slackening of that grip, and, vague beneath his feet, the greasy cobblestones.

'Very well,' said the voice, 'you've actually managed to impress me, Seba Krafar. Reach up to that old lantern hook, there on your left – you can hold yourself up until the strength returns to your legs. It wouldn't do anything for your already damaged dignity to have you fall now. Stay facing the wall for ten steady breaths, eyes closed. I don't want to have to change my mind about you.'

'First impressions are never easy to live up to,' said Seba, 'but I'll do my best.'

The hand pulled away, then returned to give his shoulder a gentle pat.

He stood, forehead pressed against the wall, eyes closed, and counted ten slow breaths. Somewhere round the third one, he caught the stench – oh, more than just muscles let loose below his neck, and now he understood the man's comments on dignity. *Yes, plopping down on my arse would've been most unpleasant.*

Sweat ran down both sides of his face. Glancing straight down, he saw the small bag with its measly five coins.

'Shit,' he muttered, 'I forgot to write him a receipt.'

*

Fisher waited at the mouth of the alley, until he saw the Master Assassin delicately bend down to retrieve the bag.

Agreement consummated.

The Master Assassin, he was certain, would bother them no more. As for Humble Measure, well, that man's downfall would require something considerably more complicated. But there was time.

And this is the lesson here, dear friends. Even a man such as Fisher kel Tath, for all his formidable, mysterious qualities, was quite capable of grievous errors in judgement.

Time then to return to K'rul's Bar. Perhaps Picker had found her way back, into that cool flesh that scarcely drew breath. If not, why, Fisher might have to do something about that. Lost souls had a way of getting into trouble.

Was this sufficient cause for his own carelessness? Perhaps. Leaving the round and its crowds, he walked into the narrow, shady Avenue of the Bullocks, threading between the few hurrying passers-by – at night, this street was notorious for muggings, and indeed, was it not but two days ago that the City Guard had found yet another battered corpse? There, before those very steps leading to a shop selling square nails, rivets and wooden frames on which to hang skinned things and other works worthy of display. Even during the day this track was risky. It was the shadows, you see—

And out from one stepped a small, toad-visaged apparition wearing a broad grin that split the very dark, somewhat pocked face, reminding one of a boldly slashed overripe melon. Seemingly balanced on this creature's head was a bundle of bow-gut – no, it was hair – in which at least three spiders nested.

'You,' hissed the man, his eyes bright and then shifty, and then bright once more.

'None other,' said Fisher, with the faintest of sighs.

'Of course not.' The head tilted but the hair did not slide off. 'Another idiot – this city's full of them! "None other." What kind of thing to say is that? If some other, why, I'd not have leapt into his path, would I? Best keep this simple.' The head righted itself, spiders adjusting their perches to match. 'I bring word from my brilliant not-all-there master.' A sudden whisper: 'Brilliant, yes, a word used most advisedly; still, use it once and we're done with it for ever.' He then raised his voice once more. 'When all this is done —'

'Excuse me,' cut in Fisher. 'When all what is done?'

'This, of course! Foolish Iskaral – keep it simple! Simpler, even! Listen, dear middling bard, when all this is done, eke out the eel – no, wait – er, seek out the eel. Seal? Damn, I had the message memorized and everything!

Peek at – eat an eel – seek and peek the bleak earl – perk the veal, deal the prick – oh, Hood's breath! What was it again? And I had the gall to call him brilliant! He should've sent Sordiko Qualm, yes, so I could've followed the glorious rocking ship of her sweet hips—' and he wagged his head side to side, side to side, eyes glazing, 'slib-slab, slib-slab, oh!'

'Thank you,' Fisher said as the man began muttering under his breath and pausing every now and then to lick his lips, 'for, er, the message. I assure you, I understand.'

'Of course you do – you're a man, aren't you? Gods, that a simple casual stride could so reduce one to gibbering worship – why, who needs gods and goddesses when we have arses like that?'

'Indeed, who? Now, since you have successfully delivered your message from your master, may I proceed on my way?'

'What? Naturally. Go away. You're a damned distraction, is what you are.'

A tilt of the head, and the bard was indeed on his way once more.

The mob outside the newly consecrated Temple of the Fallen One, or the Crippled God, or indeed the name by which most knew it – the Temple of Chains – was thick and strangely rank. More than natural sweat as might be squeezed out by the midmorning sun, this was the human rendering of desperation, made even sicklier with obsequious anticipation.

Yet the door to the narrow-fronted temple remained shut, evidently barred from within. Offerings were heaped up against it – copper and tin coins as well as links of chain and the odd clasp and cheap jewellery.

Bedek on his cart and Myrla standing before him, gripping the handles, found themselves in the midst of trembling alcoholics, the pock-scarred, the lame and the deformed. Milky eyes stared, as if cataracts were punishment for having seen too much – all other eyes were filled with beseeching need, the hunger for blessing, for even the passing brush of a twisted hand if it belonged to the Prophet. Misshapen faces lifted up, held fixedly upon that door. Within the press the stink became unbearable. The breath of rotting teeth and consumptive dissolution. From his low perch, Bedek could see

nothing but shoulders and the backs of heads. Whimpering, he plucked at his wife's tunic.

'Myrla. *Myrla!'*

The look she turned on him was both savage and . . . small, and with a shock Bedek suddenly saw her – and himself – as meaningless, insignificant, worthless. They were, he realized, no better than anyone else here. Each of them, seeking to be singled out, to be guided out, to be raised up from all the others. Each dreaming of coming into glorious focus in the eyes of a god – eyes brimming with pity and knowledge, eyes that understood injustice and the unfairness of existence. A god, yes, to make them right. *To make us all – each and every one of us – right. Whole.*

But Bedek had held no such notions. They were not why he was here. He and Myrla were different. From all of these people. They, you see, had lost a child.

The door would remain locked, they learned, until at least midday. Sometimes even later. And even then, the Prophet might not emerge. If he was communing with his own pain, they were told, he might not be seen for days.

Yes, but did he *bless* people? Did he *help* people?

Oh, yes. Why, I saw a man in terrible pain, and the Prophet took it all away.

He healed the man?

No, he smothered him. Delivered his spirit – now at peace – into the hands of the Fallen One. If you are in pain, this is where you can end your life – only here, do you understand, can you be sure your soul will find a home. There, in the loving heart of the Fallen One. Don't you want to find your legs again? Other side of life, that's where you'll find them.

And so Bedek came to understand that, perhaps, this Crippled God could not help them. Not with finding Harllo. And all at once he wanted to go home.

But Myrla would have none of that. The yearning was unabated in her eyes, but it had been transformed, and what she sought now had nothing to do with Harllo. Bedek did not know what that new thing might be, but he was frightened down to the core of his soul.

Snell struggled to form a sling to take the runts, both of whom were lying senseless on the floor. He had checked to see they were both breathing, since he'd heard that making them black out could sometimes kill them – if he'd held them tight for too long – though he'd been careful. He was always careful when doing that, though if one of them did die, why, he would say it went to sleep and just never woke up and that happened, didn't it, with the little ones? And then he'd cry because that was expected.

Poor thing, but it'd always been weak, hadn't it? So many children were weak. Only the strong ones, the smart ones, survived. It's what the world was like, after all, and the world can't be changed, not one bit.

There was a man in the Daru High Market who always dressed well and had plenty of coin, and it was well known he'd take little ones. Ten, twenty silver councils, boy or girl, it didn't matter which. He knew people, rich people – he was just the middleman, but you dealt with him if you didn't want no one to find out anything, and if there were any small bodies left over, well, they never ever showed up to start people asking questions.

It would be a bit of a walk, especially with both Mew and Hinty, and that's why he needed to work out a sling of some sort, like the ones the Rhivi mothers used. Only, how did they do that?

The door opened behind him and Snell whirled in sudden terror.

The man standing on the threshold was familiar – he'd been with Stonny Menackis the last time she'd visited – and Snell could see at once that dear Snell was in trouble. Ice cold fear, a mouth impossibly dry, a pounding heart.

'They're just sleeping!'

The man stared. 'What have you done to them, Snell?'

'Nothing! Go away. Da and Ma aren't here. They went to the Chains Temple. Come back later.'

Instead, the man stepped inside. One gloved hand casually flung Snell back, away from the motionless girls on the floor. The blow rocked Snell, and as if a stopper had been jarred loose fear poured through him. As the man knelt and drew off a glove to set a palm against Mew's forehead, Snell scrabbled to the back wall.

'I'm gonna call the guards – I'm gonna scream—'

'Shut your damned face or I'll do it for you.' A quick, heavy look. 'I've not yet started with you, Snell. Everything comes back to you. On the day Harllo went missing, on that day, Snell . . .' He lifted his hand and straightened. 'Are they drugged? Tell me how you did this.'

He meant to keep lying, but all at once he thought that maybe if he told the truth about this, the man might believe the lies he used afterwards, on the other stuff. 'I just squeeze 'em, when they cry too much, that's all. It don't hurt them none, honest.'

The man had glanced at the stretch of burlap lying beside Mew. Maybe he was putting things together, but nothing could be proved, could it? It would be all right. It would be—

Two quick strides and those hands – one gloved and the other bare and scarred – snagged the front of Snell's tunic. He was lifted into the air until his eyes were level with the man's. And Snell saw in those deadly eyes something dark, a lifeless whisper that could flatten out at any moment, and all thoughts of lying whimpered away.

'On that day,' the man said, 'you came back with a load of sun-dried dung. Something you'd never done before, and have never done since. No, your mother said it was Harllo who did such things. Harllo, who at five fucking years old did more to help this family than you ever have. Who collected that dung, Snell?'

Snell had widened his eyes as wide as they could go. He made his chin tremble. 'Harllo,' he whispered, 'but I never hurt him – I swear it!' Oh, he

hadn't wanted to lie. It just came out.

'Past Worrytown or Two-Ox Gate?'

'The gate. Two-Ox.'

'Did you go with him or did you follow him? What happened out there, Snell?'

And Snell's eyes betrayed him then, a flicker too instinctive to stop in time – down to where Mew and Hinty were lying.

The man's eyes flattened just as Snell had feared they might.

'I never killed him! He was breathing when I left him! If you kill me they'll find out – they'll arrest you – you'll go to the gallows – you can't kill me – don't!'

'You knocked him out and left him there, after stealing the dung he'd collected. The hills beyond Two-Ox Gate.'

'And I went back, a couple of days – the day after – and he was gone! He's just run off, that's all—'

'A five-year-old boy doing everything he could to help his family just ran off, did he? Or did you drive him off, Snell?'

'I never did – he was just gone – and that's not my fault, is it? Someone maybe found him, maybe even adopted him.'

'You are going to tell your parents everything, Snell,' the man said. 'I will be back tonight, probably late, but I will be back. Don't even think of running—'

'He won't,' said a voice from the door.

The man turned. 'Bellam – what—'

'Master Murillio, I'll stay here and keep an eye on the fucker. And when his parents show up, well, he'll spill it all out. Go on, Master, you don't need to worry about anything happening back here.'

The man – Murillio – was silent for a time, seeming to study the rangy boy who stood, arms folded, leaning against the doorway's frame.

And then he set Snell down and stepped back. 'I won't forget this, Bellam.'

'It'll be fine, Master. I won't beat the bones out of him, much as I'd like to, and much as he obviously deserves it. No, he's going to sit and play with his little sisters – soon as they come round—'

'A splash of water should do it.'

'After a splash, then. And not only is Snell going to play with them, but he's going to make a point of losing every game, every argument. If they want him to stand on his head while picking his arsehole, why, that's what Snell will do. Right, Snell?'

Snell had met older boys just like this one. They had calm eyes but that was just to fix you good when you weren't expecting nothing. He was more frightened of this Bellam than he'd been of Murillio. 'You hurt me and I'll get my friends after you,' he hissed. 'My street friends—'

'And when they hear the name Bellam Nom they'll cut you loose faster than you can blink.'

Murillio had found a clay bowl into which he now poured some water.

'Master,' said Bellam, 'I can do that. You got what you needed from him – at least a trail, a place to start.'

'Very well. Until tonight then, Bellam, and thank you.'

After he'd left, Bellam shut the door and advanced on Snell, who once more cringed against the back wall.

'You said—'

'We do that, don't we, when it comes to grown-ups.'

'Don't touch me!'

'No grown-ups anywhere close, Snell – what do *you* like to do when they're not around? Oh, yes, that's right. You like to torment everyone

smaller than you. That sounds a fun game. I think I'll play, and look, you're smaller than me. Now, what torment shall we do first?'

In leaving them for the time being, all grim concern regarding anything unduly cruel can be thankfully dispensed with. Bellam Nom, being cleverer than most, knew that true terror belonged not to what did occur, but to what *might* occur. He was content to encourage Snell's own imagination into the myriad possibilities, which was a delicate and precise form of torture. Especially useful in that it left no bruises.

Bullies learn nothing when bullied in turn; there are no lessons, no about-face in their squalid natures. The principle of righteous justice is a peculiar domain where propriety and vengeance become confused, almost indistinguishable. The bullied bully is shown but the other side of the same fear he or she has lived with all his or her life. The about-face happens there, on the outside, not the inside. Inside, the bully and everything that haunts the bully's soul remains unchanged.

It is an abject truth, but conscience cannot be shoved down the throat.

If only it could.

*

Moths were flattened against the walls of the narrow passageway, waiting for something, probably night. As it was a little used route to and from the Vidikas estate, frequented twice a day at specific times by deliveries to the kitchen, Challice had taken to using it with all the furtive grace of the insouciant adulteress that she had become. The last thing she expected was to almost run into her husband there in the shadows midway through.

Even more disconcerting, it was clear that he had been awaiting her. One hand holding his duelling gloves as if about to slap them across her cheek, yet there was an odd smile on his face. 'Darling,' he said.

She halted before him, momentarily struck dumb. It was one thing to play out the game at breakfast, a table between them cluttered with all the false icons of a perfect and perfectly normal marriage. Their language then was such a smooth navigation round all those deadly shoals that it seemed the

present was but a template of the future, of years and years of this; not a single wound stung to life, no tragic floundering on the jagged shallows, sailors drowning in the foam.

He stood before her now, tall with a thousand sharp edges, entirely blocking her path, his eyes glittering like wrecker fires on a promontory. 'So pleased I found you,' he said. 'I must head out to the mining camp – no doubt you can hear the carriage being readied behind you.'

Casual words, yet she was startled, like a bird; flash of fluttering, panicked wings in the gloom as she half turned to register the snort of horses and the rustle of traces from the forecourt behind her. 'Oh,' she managed, then faced him once more. Her heart's rapid beat began slowing down.

'Even here,' Gorlas said, 'there is a sweet flush to your cheeks, dear. Most becoming.'

She could almost feel the brush of fingertips to grant benediction to the compliment. A moth, startled awake by the clash of currents in the dusty air, wings dry as talc as it fluttered against her face. She flinched back. 'Thank you,' she said.

This was just another game, of course. She realized that now. He did not want things to get messy, not here, not any time soon. She told herself this with certainty, and hoped it was true. But then, why not an explosive shattering? Freeing him, freeing her – wouldn't that be healthier in the end? *Unless his idea of freeing himself is to kill me. Such things happen, don't they?*

'I do not expect to be back for at least three days. Two nights.'

'I see. Be well on your journey, Gorlas.'

'Thank you, darling.' And then, without warning, he stepped close, his free hand grasping her right breast. 'I don't like the thought of strangers doing this,' he said, his voice low, that odd smile still there. 'I need to picture the face, one I know well. I need a sense of the bastard behind it.'

She stared into his eyes and saw only a stranger, calculating, as clinical and cold as a dresser of the dead – like the one who'd come to do what was needed with the corpse of her mother, once the thin veil of sympathy was tossed aside like a soiled cloth and the man set to work.

'When I get back,' he continued, 'we'll have a talk. One with details. I want to know all about him, Challice.'

She knew that what she said at this precise moment would echo in her husband's mind for virtually every spare moment in the course of the next three days and two nights, and by the time he returned her words would have done their work in transforming him – into a broken thing, or into a monster. She could say *All right*, as if she was being forced, cornered, and whatever immediate satisfaction he felt would soon twist into something dark, unpleasant, and she would find herself across from a vengeful creature in three days' time. She might say *If you like*, and he would hear that as defiance and cruel indifference – as if for her his needs were irrelevant, as if she would oblige out of pity and not much else. No, in truth she had few choices in what she might utter at this moment. In an instant, as he awaited her response, she decided on what she would say and when it came out it was calm and assured (but not too much so). 'Until then, husband.'

He nodded, and she saw the pupils of his eyes dilate. She caught his quickened breathing, and knew her choice had been the right one. Now, the next three days and two nights, Gorlas would be as one on fire. With anticipation, with his imagination unleashed and playing out scenarios, each one a variation on a single theme.

*Yes, Gorlas, we are not done with each other yet, after all.*

His hand withdrew from her breast and, with a courtly bow, he stepped to one side to permit her to pass.

She did so.

Murillio hired a horse for the day; with tack included, the rental amounted to three silver councils along with a twenty-council deposit. Of that, the animal was worth perhaps five, certainly not much more. Slope-backed, at least ten years old, worn out, beaten down, the misery in the beast's eyes

stung Murillio to sympathy and he was of half a mind to forgo the deposit and leave the animal in the hands of a kindly farmer with plenty of spare pasture.

He rode at a slow, plodding walk through the crowded streets, until he reached Two-Ox Gate. Passing through the archway's shadow, he collected the horse into a steady trot on the cobbled road, passing laden wagons and carts and the occasional Gadrobi peasant struggling beneath baskets filled with salted fish, flasks of oil, candles and whatever else they needed to make bearable living in a squalid hut along the roadside.

Once beyond the leper colony, he began scanning the lands to either side, seeking the nearest active pasture. A short distance on he spied sheep and goats wandering the slope of a hillside to his right. A lone shepherd hobbled along the ridge, waving a switch to keep the flies off. Murillio pulled his mount off the road and rode towards him.

The old man noticed his approach and halted.

He was dressed in rags, but the crook he carried looked new, freshly oiled and polished. His eyes were smeared with cataracts from too many years in the bright sunlight, and he squinted, wary and nervous, as Murillio drew up and settled back in the saddle.

'Hello, good shepherd.'

A terse nod answered him.

'I am looking for someone—'

'Nobody but me here,' the old man replied, flicking the switch before his face.

'This was a few weeks back. A young boy, up here collecting dung, perhaps.'

'We get 'em, out from the city.'

The furtiveness was ill-disguised. The old man licked his lips, switched at flies that weren't there. There were secrets here, Murillio realized. He

dismounted. 'You know of this one,' he said. 'Five years old. He was hurt, possibly unconscious.'

The shepherd stepped back as he approached, half raised the crook. 'What was I supposed to do?' he demanded. 'The ones that come out here, they got nothing. They live in the streets. They sell the dung for a few coppers. I got no help here, we just working for somebody else. We go hungry every winter – what was I supposed to do?'

'Just tell me what happened,' said Murillio. 'You do that and maybe I'll just walk away, leave you be. But you're a bad liar, old man, and if you try again I might get angry.'

'We wasn't sure he was gonna live – he was beat up near dead, sir. Woulda died if we hadn't found him, took care of him.'

'And then?'

'Sold him off. It's hard enough, feedin' ourselves—'

'To who? Where is he?'

'Iron mines. The Eldra Holdings, west of here.'

Murillio felt a chill grip his heart. 'A five-year-old boy—'

'Moles, they call 'em. Or – so I heard.'

He returned to the horse. Lifted himself into the saddle and roughly pulled the beast round. Rode hard back to the road.

A thousand paces along, the horse threw a shoe.

The ox lumbered along at the pace of a beast for which time was meaningless, and perhaps in this it was wise indeed. Walking beside it, the man with the crop twitched its flank every now and then, but this was habit, not urgency. The load of braided leather was not a particularly onerous burden, and if the carter timed things right, why, he might wangle himself a meal at the camp before the long return journey back to the city. At least by then the day would be mostly done and the air would've cooled. In this heat, neither man nor beast was in any hurry.

Hardly surprising, then, that the lone traveller on foot caught up with them before too long, and after a brief conversation – a few words to either side of the jangle of coins – the load on the cart grew heavier, yet still not enough to force a groan from the ox. This was, after all, the task of its life, the very definition of its existence. In truth, it had little memory of ever being free, of ever trundling along without something to drag behind it, or the endless reverberation in its bones as wheels clunked across cobbles, slipping into and out of worn ruts in the stone.

Languid blinks, the storm of flies that danced in the heat, twitching tail and spots of blood on the fetlocks, and pulling something from one place to another. And at its side, squinting red-shot eyes, a storm of flies dancing, spots of blood here and there from midges and whatnot, and taking something from one place to another. Ox and driver, parallel lives through meaningless years. A singular variation, now, the man sitting with legs dangling off the cart, his boots worn and blisters oozing, and the dark maelstrom in his eyes that was for neither of them, and no business of theirs besides.

The ornate, lacquered, leaf-sprung carriage that rumbled past them a league from the camp had its windows shuttered against the heat and dust.

The man in the back had watched its approach. The carter watched it pass. The ox saw it moving away in front of it at a steady pace that it could never match, even had it wanted to, which it didn't.

Snell was nobody's fool, and when the ball of bound multicoloured twine rolled close to the door and Hinty stared at it, expecting its miraculous return to her pudgy, grimy hands, why, Snell obliged – and as soon as he was at the door, he darted outside and was gone.

He heard Bellam's shout, but Snell had a good head start and besides, the stupid idiot wouldn't just leave the runts behind, would he? No, Snell had made good his escape, easy as that, because he was clever and jerks could threaten him all the time but he won in the end, he always won – proof of his cleverness.

Up the street, into an alley, under the broken fence, across the narrow yard – chickens scattering from his path – and on to the stacked rabbit pens, over the next fence, into Twisty Alley, twenty strides up and then left, into the muddy track where a sewage pipe leaked. Nobody'd go down this pinched passageway, what with the stench and all, but he did, piss soaking through his worn moccasins, and then he was out on to Purse Street, and freedom.

Better if he'd stolen the runts to sell. Better still if he'd still had his stash of coins. Now, he had nothing. But nobody would catch him now. There were some older boys with connections to the gang that worked Worrytown, lifting what they could from the trader wagons that crowded through. If Snell could get out there, he'd be outside the city, wouldn't he? They could hunt for ever and not find him.

And he could make himself rich. He could rise in the ranks and become a pack leader. People would be scared of him, terrified even. Merchants would pay him just not to rob them. And he'd buy an estate, and hire assassins to kill Bellam Nom and Stonny Menackis and Murillio. He'd buy up his parents' debts and make them pay *him* every month – wouldn't that be something? It'd be perfect. And his sisters he could pimp out and eventually he'd have enough money to buy a title of some sort, get on the Council, and proclaim himself King of Darujhistan, and he'd order new gallows built and execute everyone who'd done him wrong.

He rushed through the crowds, his thoughts a world away, a future far off but almost in reach.

His feet were clipped out from under him and he fell hard: numbing shock from one shoulder and his hip. Bellam Nom stood over him, breathing hard but grinning.

'Nice try,' he said.

'Mew and Hinty! You left them—'

'Locked up, yes. That's what slowed me down.' And he reached down, grasped Snell's arm and yanked him to his feet, twisting hard enough to make him yelp in pain.

Bellam dragged Snell back the way he'd come.

'I'm going to kill you one day,' Snell said, then winced as Bellam's grip tightened on his arm.

'It's what people like you rely on, isn't it?'

'What?'

'That none of us are as nasty as you. That we'll have qualms about, say, skinning you alive. Or shattering your kneecaps. Gouging out your eyes. You want to kill me? Fine, just don't be surprised if I get to you first, Snell.'

'You can't murder—'

'Can't I? Why not? You seem to think you can, whenever you like, whenever the chance arises. Well, I'm not Stonny Menackis. I'm not Murillio, either. They're . . . civilized folk. No, Snell, I'm more like you, only I'm older and better at it.'

'If you did anything to me, Murillio would have to go after you. Like you say, he's not like us. Or Stonny. She'd cut you to pieces. Yes, it'd be Stonny, once Da asked her to, and he would.'

'You're making a big assumption, Snell.'

'What?'

'That they'd ever figure out it was me.'

'I'll warn them – as soon as they come back – I'll warn them about you—'

'Before or after you make your confession? About what you did to poor Harllo?'

'That was different! I didn't do nothing on purpose—'

'You hurt him, probably killed him, and left his body for the birds. You kept it all a secret, Snell. Hood knows, if I asked nicely enough, your da might just hand you over to me and good riddance to you.'

Snell said nothing. There was true terror inside him now. So much terror it filled him up, spilled out through his pores, and out from between his

legs. This Bellam was a monster. He didn't feel anything for nobody. He just wanted to hurt Snell. A monster. A vicious demon, yes, a demon. Bellam was everything that was wrong with . . . with . . . everything.

'I'll be good,' Snell whimpered. 'You'll see. I'll make it right, all of it.'

But these were lies, and both of them knew it. Snell was what he was, and no amount of cuddling and coddling would change that. He stood, there in the mind, as if to say: *we are in your world. More of us than you imagine. If you knew how many of us there are, you'd be very, very frightened. We are here. Now, what are you going to do with us?* Snell was what he was, yes, and so, too, was Bellam Nom.

When he was dragged in through the narrow door of a nondescript shop at the near end of Twisty Alley, Snell suddenly recoiled – he knew this place. He knew—

'What you got yourself there, Bellam?'

'A fresh one, Goruss, and I'll let him go cheap.'

*'Wait!'* Snell shrieked, and then a heavy hand clamped over his mouth and he was pulled into the gloom, smelling rank sweat, feeling a breath on his cheek as the ogre named Goruss leaned in close.

'A screamer, iz he?'

'A nasty little shit, in fact.'

'We'll work that outer 'im.'

'Not this one. He'd stab his mother just to watch the blood flow. 'Sprobably left a trail of tortured small animals ten leagues long, buried in little holes in every back yard of the neighbourhood. This is one of those, Goruss.'

'Eighteen silver?'

'Slivers?'

'Yah.'

'All right.'

Snell thrashed about as he was carried off into a back room, then down steps and into an unlit cellar that smelled of piss-soaked mud. He was gagged and bound and thrown into a low iron cage. Goruss then went back up the stairs, leaving Snell alone.

In the front room, Goruss sat down across from Bellam.

'Ale, nephew?'

'Too early for me, Uncle.'

'How long you want me to hold him?'

'Long enough to shit everything out of him. I want him so scared he breaks inside.'

'Give him a night, then. Enough to run through all his terrors, but not so much he gets numb. Shit, nephew, I don't deal in anybody under, oh, fifteen years old, and we do careful interviewing and observing, and only the completely hopeless ones get shipped to the rowing benches. And even then, they get paid and fed and signed out after five years – and most of them do good after that.'

'I doubt Snell knows any of that, Uncle. Just that children are dragged into this shop and they don't come back out.'

'Must look that way.'

Bellam smiled. 'Oh, it does, Uncle, it does.'

'Not seen him in days.'

Barathol just nodded, then walked over to the cask of water to wash the grime off his forearms and hands. Chaur sat on a crate nearby, eating some local fruit with a yellow skin and pink, fleshy insides. Juice dribbled down his stubbled chin.

Scillara gave him a bright smile as she wandered into the front room. The air smelled brittle and acrid, the way it does in smithies, and she thought now that, from this moment on, the scent would accompany her every

recollection of Barathol, this large man with the gentle eyes. 'Had any more trouble with the Guilds?' she asked.

He dried himself off and flung the cloth to one side. 'They're making it hard, but I expected that. We're surviving.'

'So I see.' She kicked at a heap of iron rods. 'New order?'

'Swords. The arrival of the Malazan embassy's garrison has triggered a new fad among the nobles. Imperial longswords. Gave trouble to most of the local swordsmiths.' He shrugged. 'Not me, of course.'

Scillara settled down in the lone chair and began scraping out her pipe. 'What's so special about Malazan longswords?'

'The very opposite, actually. The local makers haven't quite worked out that they have to reverse engineer to get them right.'

'Reverse engineer?'

'The Malazan longsword's basic design and manufacture is originally Untan, from the imperial mainland. Three centuries old, at least, maybe older. The empire still uses the Untan foundries and they're a conservative bunch.'

'Well, if the damned things do what they're supposed to do, why make changes?'

'That seems to be the thinking, yes. The locals have gone mad folding and refolding, trying to capture that rough solidity, but the Untan smiths are in the habit of working iron not hot enough. It's also red iron that they're using – the Untan Hills are rotten with it even though it's rare everywhere else.' He paused, watching as she lit her pipe. 'This can't be of any real interest to you, Scillara.'

'Not really, but I do like the sound of your voice.' And she looked up at him through the smoke, her eyes half veiled.

'Anyway, I can make decent copies and the word's gone out. Eventually, some swordsmith will work things out, but by then I'll have plenty of satisfied customers and even undercutting me won't be too damaging.'

'Good,' she said.

He studied her for a moment, and then said, 'So, Cutter's gone missing, has he?'

'I don't know about that. Only that I've not seen him in a few days.'

'Are you worried?'

She thought about it, and then thought some more. 'Barathol, that wasn't my reason for visiting you. I wasn't looking for someone to charge in as if Cutter's been kidnapped or something. I'm here because I wanted to see you. I'm lonely – oh, I don't mean anybody'll do, either, when I say that. I just wanted to see you, that's all.'

After a moment, he shrugged and held out his hands. 'Here I am.'

'You won't make it easy, will you?'

'Scillara, look at me. Please, look. Carefully. You're too fast for me. Cutter, that historian, even that Bridgeburner, you leave them all spinning in your wake. Given my choice, I'd rather go through the rest of my life beneath the notice of everyone. I'm not interested in drama, or even excitement.'

She stretched out her legs. 'And you think I am?'

'It's life that you're full of.' Barathol frowned and then shook his head. 'I'm not very good at saying what I mean, am I?'

'Keep trying.'

'You can be . . . overwhelming.'

'Typical, put on a little fat and suddenly I'm too much for him.'

'You're not fat and you know it. You have,' he hesitated, 'shape.'

She thought to laugh, decided that it might come out too obviously hurt, which would make him feel even worse. Besides, her comment had been little more than desperate misdirection – she'd lost most of the weight she'd

put on during her pregnancy. 'Barathol, has it not occurred to you that maybe I am as I am because behind it all there's not much else?'

His frown deepened.

Chaur dropped down from the crate and came over. He patted her on the head with a sticky hand and then hurried off into the yard.

'But you've lived through so much.'

'And you haven't? Gods below, you were an officer in the Red Blades. What you did in Aren—'

'Was just me avoiding a mess, Scillara. As usual.'

'What are we talking about here?'

His eyes shied away. 'I'm not sure. I suppose, now that Cutter's left you . . .'

'And Duiker's too old and Picker's a woman and that's fun but not serious – for me, at least – I've found myself in need of another man. Chaur's a child, in his head, that is. Leaving . . . you.'

The harsh sarcasm of her voice stung him and he almost stepped back. 'From where I'm standing,' he said.

'Well,' she said, sighing, 'it's probably what I deserve, actually. I have been a bit . . . loose. Wayward. Looking, trying, not finding, trying again. And again. From where you're standing, yes, I can see that.'

'None of that would matter to me,' Barathol then said. 'Except, well, I don't want to be just another man left in your wake.'

'No wonder you've devoted your life to making weapons and armour. Problem is, you're doing that for everyone else.'

He said nothing. He simply watched her, as, she realized, he had been doing for some time now. All at once, Scillara felt uncomfortable. She drew hard on her pipe. 'Barathol, you need some armour of your own.'

And he nodded. 'I see.'

'I'm not going to make promises I can't keep. Still, it may be that my waywardness is coming to an end. People like us, who spend all our time looking, well, even when we *find* it we usually don't realize – until it's too late.'

'Cutter.'

She squinted up at him. 'He had no room left in his heart, Barathol. Not for me, not for anyone.'

'So he's just hiding right now?'

'In more ways than one, I suspect.'

'But he's broken your heart, Scillara.'

'Has he?' She considered. 'Maybe he has. Maybe I'm the one needing armour.' She snorted. 'Puts me in my place, doesn't it.' And she rose.

Barathol started. 'Where are you going?'

'What? I don't know. Somewhere. Nowhere. Does it matter?'

'Wait.' He stepped closer. 'Listen to me, Scillara.' And then he was silent, on his face a war of feelings trying to find words. After a moment, his scowl deepened. 'Yesterday, if Cutter had just walked in here to say hello, I'd have taken him by the throat. Hood, I'd have probably beaten him unconscious and tied him up in that chair. Where he'd stay – until you dropped by.'

'Yesterday.'

'When I thought I had no chance.'

She was having her own trouble finding words. 'And now?'

'I think . . . I've just thrown on some armour.'

'The soldier . . . un-retires.'

'Well, I'm a man, and a man never learns.'

She grinned. 'That's true enough.'

And then she leaned close, and as he slowly raised his arms to take her into an embrace she almost shut her eyes – all that relief, all that anticipation of pleasure, even joy – and the hands instead grasped her upper arms and she was pushed suddenly to one side. Startled, she turned to see a squad of City Guard crowding the doorway.

The officer in the lead had the decency to look embarrassed.

'Barathol Mekhar? By city order, this smithy is now under temporary closure, and I am afraid I have to take you into custody.'

'The charge?'

'Brought forward by the Guild of Smiths. Contravention of proper waste disposal. It is a serious charge, I'm afraid. You could lose your business.'

'I don't understand,' Barathol said. 'I am making use of the sewage drains – I spill nothing—'

'The common drain, yes, but you should be using the industrial drain, which runs alongside the common drain.'

'This is the first I have heard of such a thing.'

'Well,' said a voice behind the guards, 'if you were a member of the Guild, you'd know all about it, wouldn't you?'

It was a woman who spoke, but Scillara could not see past the men in the doorway.

Barathol threw up his hands. 'Very well, I am happy to comply. I will install the proper pipes—'

'You may do so,' said the officer, 'once the charges are properly adjudicated, fines paid, and so forth. In the meantime, this establishment must be shut down. The gas valves must be sealed. Materials and tools impounded.'

'I see. Then let me make some arrangement for my helper – somewhere to stay and—'

'I am sorry,' cut in the officer, 'but the charge is against both you and your apprentice.'

'Not precisely,' said the unseen woman. 'The blacksmith cannot have an apprentice unless he is a member of the Guild. The two are colluding to undermine the Guild.'

The officer's expression tightened. 'As she said, yes. I'm not here to prattle on in the language of an advocate. I do the arrest and leave one of my guards to oversee the decommissioning of the establishment by a qualified crew.'

'A moment,' said Barathol. 'You are arresting Chaur?'

'Is that your apprentice's name?'

'He's not my apprentice. He's a simpleton—'

'Little more than a slave, then,' snapped the unseen official of the Guild. 'That would be breaking a much more serious law, I should think.'

Scillara watched as two men went to the yard and returned with a wide-eyed, whimpering Chaur. Barathol attempted to console him, but guards stepped in between them and the officer warned that, while he didn't want to make use of shackles, he would if necessary. So, if everyone could stay calm and collected, they could march out of here like civilized folk. Barathol enquired as to his right to hire an advocate and the officer replied that, while it wasn't a right as such, it was indeed a privilege Barathol could exercise, assuming he could afford one.

At that point Scillara spoke up and said, 'I'll find one for you, Barathol.'

A flicker of relief and gratitude in his eyes, replaced almost immediately by his distress over the fate of Chaur, who was now bawling and tugging his arms free every time a guard sought to take hold of him.

'Let him alone,' said Barathol. 'He'll follow peacefully enough – just don't grab him.'

And then the squad, save one, all marched out with their prisoners. Scillara fell in behind them, and finally saw the Guild official, a rather

imposing woman whose dignity was marred by the self-satisfied smirk on her face.

As Scillara passed behind the woman, she took hold of her braid and gave it a sharp downward tug.

'Ow!' The woman whirled, her expression savage.

'Sorry,' Scillara said. 'Must have caught on my bracelet.'

And as Scillara continued on down the street, she heard, from the squad officer: 'She's not wearing any bracelet.'

The Guild woman hissed and said, 'I want her—' And then Scillara turned the corner. She did not expect the officer to send anyone in pursuit. The man was doing his job and had no interest in complicating things.

'And there I was,' she muttered under her breath, 'about to trap a very fine man in my messed-up web. Hoping – praying – that he'd be the one to untangle my life.' She snorted. 'Just my luck.'

From rank superstitions to scholarly treatises, countless generations had sought understanding of those among them whose minds stayed undeveloped, childlike or, indeed, seemingly trapped in some other world. God and demon possession, stolen souls, countless chemical imbalances and unpleasant humours, injuries sustained at birth or even before; blows to the head as a child; fevers and so on. What could never be achieved, of course (barring elaborate, dangerous rituals of spirit-walking), was to venture into the mind of one thus afflicted.

It would be easy to assume an inner world of simple feelings, frightening unknowns and the endless miasma of confusion. Or some incorporeal demon crouched down on every thought, crushing the life from it, choking off every possible passage to awareness. Such assumptions, naturally, are but suppositions, founded only on external observation: the careful regard of seemingly blank eyes and stupid smiles, repetitive behaviour and unfounded fears.

Hold tight, then, this hand, on this momentary journey into Chaur's mind.

The world he was witness to was a place of objects, some moving, some never moving, and some that were still but could be moved if one so willed it. These three types were not necessarily fixed, and he well knew that things that seemed destined to immobility could suddenly come awake, alive, in explosive motion. Within himself, Chaur possessed apprehensions of all three, in ever shifting forms. There was love, a deeply rooted object, from which came warmth, and joy, and a sense of perfect well-being. It could, on occasion, reach out to take in another – someone or something on the outside – but, ultimately, that was not necessary. The love was within him, its very own world, and he could go there any time he liked. This was expressed in a rather dreamy smile, an expression disengaged with everything on the outside.

Powerful as it was, love was vulnerable. It could be wounded, jabbed into recoiling pain. When this happened, another object was stirred awake. It could be called *hate*, but its surface was mottled with fear and anger. This object was fixed as deeply in his soul as was love, and the two needed each other even if their relationship was strained, fraught. Prodded into life by love's pain, hate opened eyes that could only look outward – never to oneself, never even to the identity known as Chaur. Hate blazed in one direction and one only – to the outer world with its objects, some moving, some not, some that might do either, shifting from one to the next and back again.

Hate could, if it must, make use of Chaur's body. In lashing out, in a frenzied reordering of the world. To bring it back into the right shape, to force an end to whatever caused love its pain.

All of this depended upon observation, but such observation did not rely overmuch on what he saw, or heard, smelled, touched or tasted. Hate's secret vision was much sharper – it saw colours that did not exist for others, and those colours were, on an instinctive level, encyclopedic. Seeing them, hate knew *everything*. Knew, indeed, far beyond what a normal mind might achieve.

Was this little more than a peculiar sensitivity to nonverbal communication? Don't ask Chaur. He is, after all, in his own world.

His object called hate had a thing about blood. Its hue, the way it flowed, the way it smelled and tasted, and this was a bizarre truth: his hate *loved* blood. To see it, to immerse oneself in it, was to feel joy and warmth and contentment.

The guards flanking Chaur, walking at ease and with modest thoughts of their own, had no inkling of all that swirled in the seemingly simple mind of their prisoner. Who walked, limbs loose and swinging now that the natural tension that had bound up the huge man's neck and shoulders had eased away – clearly, the oaf had forgotten all the trouble he was in, had forgotten that they were all walking to a gaol, that soon Chaur would find himself inside a cage of stolid black iron bars. All those thick walls enclosing the simpleton's brain were clearly back in place.

Not worth a second glance.

And so there were none to see the hate-filled eyes peering out through every crack, every murder hole, every arrow slit – a thousand, ten thousand glittering eyes, seeing everything, the frenzied flicking as immobile objects were observed, gauged and then discarded; as others were adjudged potentially useful as things that, while unmoving, could be made to move. Seeing all, yes, absorbing and processing at speeds that would stun one of normal intelligence – because this was something different, something alien, something almost perfect in its own way, by its own rules, by all the forces it could assemble, harbour, and then, when the time was appropriate, unleash upon a most unsuspecting world.

The simple ones aren't simple. The broken ones aren't broken. They are rearranged. For better, for worse? Such judgements are without relevance. After all, imagine a world where virtually every mind is simpler than it imagines itself to be, or is so utterly broken that it is itself unaware of its own massive, stunning dysfunction. In such a world, life goes on, and madness thrives. Stupidity repeats. Behaviours destroy and destroy again, and again, yet remain impervious to enlightenment. Crimes against humanity abound, and not one victimizer can even comprehend one day becoming victim; not a single cruel soul understands that cruelty delivered yields cruelty repaid tenfold. It is enough to eat today and let tomorrow's

children starve. Wealth ever promises protection against the strictures of an unkind, avaricious world, and yet fails to deliver on that promise every single time, be the slayer disease, betrayal or the ravaging mobs of revolution. Wealth cannot comprehend that the very avarice it fears is its own creation, the toxic waste product of its own glorious exaltation. Imagine such a world, then – oh, don't bother. Better to pity poor, dumb Chaur.

Who, without warning, exploded into motion. Placid thoughts in guardian skulls shattered into oblivion as fists smashed, sending each man flying out to the side. As dulled senses of something awry shot the first spurt of chemical alarm through the nearest of the remaining guards, Chaur reached him, picked him up by belt and neck, and threw him against a happily immobile stone wall on the right. The officer and the last guard both began their whirl to confront the still mostly unknown threat, and Chaur, smiling, was there to meet them. He had in his left hand – gripped by one ear – a heavy amphora, which he had collected from a stall to his left, and he brought this object round to crash into the officer. Clay shards, a shower of pellet grain, and in their midst a crumpling body. The last guard, one hand tugging at his sword, mouth open to begin a shout of alarm, saw in his last conscious moment Chaur and his broad smile, as the simpleton, with a roundhouse swing, drove his fist into the side of the man's head, collapsing the helm on that side and sending the headpiece flying. In a welter of blood from ear and temple, the guard fell to the ground, alive but temporarily unwilling to acknowledge the fact.

And Chaur stood now facing Barathol, with such pleased, excited eyes that the blacksmith could only stare back, speechless, aghast.

Gorlas Vidikas stepped out from the carriage and paused to adjust his leggings, noting with faint displeasure the discordant creases sitting in that sweaty carriage had left him with, and then glanced up as the sickly foreman wheezed his way over.

'Noble sir,' he gasped, 'about the interest payments – I've been ill, as you know—'

'You're dying, you fool,' Gorlas snapped. 'I am not here to discuss your problems. We both know what will happen should you default on the loan, and we both know – I should trust – that you are not long for this world, which makes the whole issue irrelevant. The only question is whether you will die in your bed or end up getting tossed out on your backside.' After a moment, he stepped closer and slapped the man on his back, triggering a cloud of dust. 'You've always got your shack here at camp, yes? Come now, it's time to discuss other matters.'

The foreman blinked up at him, with all that pathetic piteousness perfected by every loser the world over. Better, of course, than the dark gleam of malice – the stupid ones were quick to hate, once they'd got a sense of how they'd been duped – no, best keep this one making all those mewling *help-me* faces.

Gorlas smiled. 'You can stay in your lovely new home, friend. I will forgo the interest payments so you can leave this world in peace and comfort.' And oh, wasn't this such extraordinary favour? This concession, this grave sacrifice, why, it would not be remiss if this idiot fell to his knees in abject gratitude, but never mind that. A second thump on the back, this one triggering a coughing fit from the old man.

Gorlas walked to the edge of the vast pit and surveyed the bustling hive of activity below. 'All is well?'

The foreman, after hacking out a palmful of yellow phlegm, hobbled up to stand hunched beside him, wiping a hand on a caked trouser leg. 'Well enough, sir, yes, well enough indeed.'

See how his mood has improved? No doubt eaten up with worry all morning, the poor useless bastard. Well, the world needed such creatures, didn't it? To do all the dirty, hard work, and then thank people like Gorlas for the privilege. *You're so very welcome, you stupid fool, and see this? It's my smile of indulgence. Bask and bask well – it's the only thing I give away that's truly free.*

'How many losses this week?'

'Three. Average, sir, that's average as can be. One mole in a cave-in, the others died of the greyface sickness. We got the new vein producing now. Would you believe, it's red iron!'

Gorlas's brows lifted, 'Red iron?'

A quick, eager nod. 'Twice the price at half-weight, that stuff. Seems there's growing demand—'

'Yes, the Malazan longswords everyone's lusting after. Well, this will make it easier to order one, since up to now only one smith had the skill to make the damned weapons.' He shook his head. 'Ugly things, if you ask me. Curious thing is, we don't get red iron round here – not till now, that is – so how was the fool making such perfect copies?'

'Well, noble sir, there's an old legend 'bout how one can actually turn regular iron into the red stuff, and do it cheap besides. Maybe it ain't just a legend.'

Gorlas grunted. Interesting. Imagine finding out that secret, being able to take regular iron, toss in something virtually worthless, and out comes red iron, worth four times the price. 'You've just given me an idea,' he murmured. 'Though I doubt the smith would give up the secret – no, I'd have to pay. A lot.'

'Maybe a partnership,' the foreman ventured.

Gorlas scowled. He wasn't asking for advice. Still, yes, a partnership might work. Something he'd heard about that smith . . . some Guild trouble. Well, could be Gorlas could smooth all that over, for a consideration. 'Never mind,' he said, a tad overloud, 'it was just a notion – I've already discarded it as too complicated, too messy. Let's forget we ever discussed it.'

'Yes, sir.'

But was the foreman looking oddly thoughtful? Might be necessary, Gorlas reflected, to hasten this fool's demise.

From up the road behind them, a trader's cart was approaching.

Stupid, really. He'd elected to wear his riding boots, but the things were ancient, worn, and it seemed his feet had flattened out some since he'd last used them, and now he had enormous blisters, damned painful ones. And so, for all his plans of a stentorian, impressive arrival at the camp, full of dour intent and an edge of bluster, to then be ameliorated by a handful of silver councils, a relieved foreman sending a runner off to retrieve the wayward child, Murillio found himself on the back of a rickety cart, covered in dust and sweating in the midst of a cloud of flies.

Well, he would just have to make the best of it, wouldn't he? As the ox halted at the top of the ridgeline, the old man walking slow as a snail over to where stood the eponymous foreman beside some fancy noble – now both looking their way – Murillio eased himself down, wincing at the lancing pain shooting up his legs, thinking with dread of the long walk back to the city, his hand holding Harllo's tiny one, with darkness crawling up from the ditches to either side – a long, long walk indeed, and how he'd manage it was, truth be told, beyond him.

Soldiers knew about blisters, didn't they? And men and women who worked hard for a living. To others, the affliction seemed trivial, a minor irritation – and when there were years between this time and the last time one had suffered from them, it was easy to forget, to casually dismiss just how debilitating they truly were.

Raw leather rubbed at each one like ground glass as he settled his weight back down. Still, it would not do to hobble over, and so, mustering all his will, Murillio walked, one careful step at a time, to where the foreman and the nobleman stood discussing things with the carter. As he drew closer, his gaze narrowed on the highborn one, a hint of recognition . . . but where? When?

The carter had been told by the foreman where to take the supplies, and off he went, with a passing nod at Murillio.

The foreman was squinting curiously, and as Murillio drew up before them he spat to one side and said, 'You look lost, sir. If you've the coin you can buy a place at the workers' table – it's plain fare but fillin' enough,

though we don't serve nothing but weak ale.' He barked a laugh. 'We ain't no roadside inn, are we?'

Murillio had thought long on how he would approach this. But he had not expected a damned nobleman in this particular scene, and something whispered to him that what should have been a simple negotiation, concluded by paying twice the going rate for a five-year-old boy, might now turn perilously complicated. 'Are you the foreman of the camp, sir?' he asked, after a deferential half-bow to the nobleman. At the answering nod, Murillio continued, 'Very good. I am here in search of a young boy, name of Harllo, who was sold to your camp a few weeks back.' He quickly raised a gloved hand. 'No, I have no desire to challenge the propriety of that arrangement. Rather, I wish to purchase the boy's freedom, and so deliver him back to his, er, terribly distressed parents.'

'Do ye now?' The foreman looked over at the nobleman.

Yes, Murillio thought he might know this young man.

'You are the one named Murillio,' the nobleman said, with an odd glitter in his gaze.

'You have the better of me—'

'That goes without saying. I am the principal investor of this operation. I am also a councillor. Gorlas Vidikas of House Vidikas.'

Murillio bowed a second time, as much to hide his dismay as in proper deference. 'Councillor Vidikas, it is a pleasure meeting you.'

'Is it? I very much doubt that. It took me a few moments to place you. You were pointed out, you see, a couple of years back, at some estate fête.'

'Oh? Well, there was a time when I was—' 'You were on a list,' Gorlas cut in.

'A what?'

'A hobby of a friend of mine, although I doubt he would have seen it as a hobby. In fact, if I was so careless as to use that word, when it came to his list, he'd probably call me out.'

'I am sorry,' Murillio said, 'but I'm afraid I do not know what you are talking about. Some sort of list, you said?'

'Likely conspirators,' Gorlas said with a faint smile, 'in the murder of Turban Orr, not to mention Ravyd Lim – or was it some other Lim? I don't recall now, but then, that hardly matters. No, Turban Orr, and of course the suspicious suicide of Lady Simtal – all on the same night, in her estate. I was there, did you know that? I saw Turban Orr assassinated with my own eyes.' And he was in truth smiling now, as if recalling something yielding waves of nostalgia. But his eyes were hard, fixed like sword points. 'My friend, of course, is Hanut Orr, and the list is his.'

'I do recall attending the Simtal fête,' Murillio said, and in his mind he was reliving those moments after leaving the Lady's bedchamber – leaving her with the means by which she could take her own life – and his thoughts, then, of everything he had surrendered, and what it might mean for his future. Appropriate, then, that it should now return to crouch at his feet, like a rabid dog with fangs bared. 'Alas, I missed the duel—'

'It was no duel, Murillio. Turban Orr was provoked. He was set up. He was assassinated, in plain view. Murder, not a duel – do you even comprehend the difference?'

The foreman was staring back and forth between them with all the dumb bewilderment of an ox.

'I do, sir, but as I said, I was not there to witness the event—'

'You call me a liar, then?'

'Excuse me?' Gods below, ten years past and he would have handled this with perfect grace and mocking equanimity, and all that was ruffled would be smoothed over, certain debts accepted, promises of honouring those debts not even needing explicit enunciation. Ten years past and—

'You are calling me a liar.'

'No, I do not recall doing so, Councillor. If you say Turban Orr was assassinated, then so be it. As for my somehow conspiring to bring it about, well, that is itself a very dangerous accusation.' Oh, he knew where this was

leading. He had known for some time, in fact. It was all there in Gorlas Vidikas's eyes – and Murillio now recalled where he had last seen this man, and heard of him. Gorlas enjoyed duelling. He enjoyed killing his opponents. Yes, he had attended one of this bastard's duels, and he had seen —

'It seems,' said Gorlas, 'we have ourselves a challenge to honour here.' He gave a short laugh. 'When you retracted your accusation, well, I admit I thought you were about to tuck your tail between your legs and scuttle off down the road. And perhaps I would've let you go at that – it's Hanut's obsession, after all. Not mine.'

Murillio said nothing, understanding how he had trapped himself, with the foreman to witness the fact that the demand for a duel had come from him, not Gorlas Vidikas. He also understood that there had been no chance, none at all, that Gorlas would have let him go.

'Naturally,' continued the councillor, 'I have no intention of withdrawing my accusation – so either accept it or call me out, Murillio. I have vague recollections that you were once judged a decent duellist.' He scanned the track to either side. 'This place seems well suited. Now, a miserable enough audience, granted, but—'

'Excuse me,' cut in the foreman, 'but the day's shift bell is about to sound. The crews can get a perfect view, what with you two on the ridgeline – if you'd like.'

Gorlas winked over at Murillio as he said, 'By all means we shall wait, then.'

The foreman trundled down the path into the pit, to ensure that the crew captains were told what was going on. They'd enjoy the treat after a long day's work in the tunnels.

As soon as the foreman was out of earshot, Gorlas grinned at Murillio. 'Now, anything more we should talk about, now that we've got no witness?'

'Thank you for the invitation,' Murillio said, tightening the straps of his glove. 'Turban Orr didn't deserve an honourable death. Hanut is your

friend? Tell me, do you enjoy sleeping with vipers, or are you just stupid?'

'If that was an attempt to bring me to a boil, it was pathetic. You truly think I don't know all the tricks leading up to a duel? Gods below, old man. Still, I am pleased by your admission – Hanut will be delighted to hear that his suspicions were accurate. More important, he will find himself in my debt.' And then he cocked his head. 'Of course, the debt will be all the greater if I let you live. A duel unto wounding – leaving your fate in Hanut's hands. Yes, that would be perfect. Well, Murillio, shall it be wounding?'

'If you like,' Murillio said.

'Are your boots pinching?'

'No.'

'You seem in discomfort, Murillio, or is that just nerves?'

Bells clanged in the pit below. Distant shouts, and out from the tunnel mouths spewed filthy figures looking barely human at this distance. Runners raced down the lines. Word was getting out.

'What's this Harllo boy to you, anyway?'

Murillio glanced back to Gorlas. 'You married Estraysian D'Arle's daughter, didn't you? She's made herself very . . . popular, of late, hasn't she? Alas, I am starting to understand why – you're not much of a man, are you, Gorlas?'

For all the councillor's previous bravado, he paled in the late afternoon light.

'It's terrible, isn't it,' Murillio went on, 'how every sordid detail, no matter how private and personal, so easily leaves the barricaded world of the wellborn and races like windblown seeds among all us common folk, us lowborn. Why, whatever happened to decency?'

The rapier rasped its way out of the sheath and the point lifted towards Murillio. 'Draw your weapon, old man.'

Krute of Talient stepped inside. He saw Rallick Nom standing by the window, but it was shuttered closed. The man might as well be standing facing a wall. Oh, he was a strange one indeed, stranger now than he'd ever been before. All that silence, all that sense of something being very much . . . wrong. In his head? Maybe. And that was a worrying thought – that Rallick Nom might not be right any more.

'It's confirmed,' said Krute, setting down the burlap sack filled with the makings for supper. 'One contract dissolved, a new one accepted. Stinks of desperation, doesn't it? Gods, Seba's even called me back and that's an invitation no sane man would refuse.' He paused, eyeing his friend, and then said, 'So you may not be seeing much of me from now on. From what I've gathered, this new one's pretty straightforward, but it's the kind that'll shake up the precious bloods.'

'Is it now?' Rallick asked, expressionless.

'Listen,' said Krute, knowing he was betraying his nerves, 'I couldn't say no, could I? It's fine enough living off your coin, but that's hard on a man's pride. I've got a chance to get back into the middle of things again. I've got a chance to walk with the Guild again. Rallick, I got to take it, you understand?'

'Is it that important to you, Krute?'

Krute nodded.

'Then,' said Rallick, 'I had best leave your company.'

'I'm sorry about that – it's my being . . . what's that word again?'

'Compromised.'

'Exactly. Now, if you'd made your move on Seba, well, we wouldn't be in this situation, would we? It's the waiting that's been so hard.'

'There are no plans to replace Seba Krafar,' said Rallick. 'I am sorry if I have unintentionally misled you on that count. This is not to say we're uninterested in the Guild.' He hesitated. 'Krute, listen carefully. I can leave

you some coin – enough for a while, a half-year's worth, in fact. Just decline Seba's invitation – you don't know what you're getting into—'

'And you do? No, Rallick, the point is, if I don't know it's because I've been pushed out of things.'

'You should be thankful for that.'

'I don't need any patronizing shit from you, Rallick Nom. You're all secrets now, nothing but secrets. But you'll live here, with me, and eat what I cook, and what about me? Oh, right, on the outside again, this time with you. Well, I can't live like that, so you'd better go. Don't think ill of me – I won't tell Seba about you.'

'Can I not buy your retirement, Krute?'

'No.'

Rallick nodded and then walked to the door. 'Guard yourself well, Krute.'

'You too, Rallick.'

*

Emerging from the tenement building's narrow back door, Rallick Nom stepped out into the rank, rubbish-filled alley. His last venture into the world had seen him very nearly killed by Crokus Younghand, and of his time spent recovering at the Phoenix Inn, it was clear that no one who'd known of his presence had said a thing – not Kruppe, nor Coll, nor Murillio, nor Meese, or Irilta; the Guild had not sniffed out his ignominious return. Even that wayward cousin of his, Torvald, had said nothing – although why that man had so vigorously avoided him was both baffling and somewhat hurtful.

Anyway, in a sense, Rallick remained invisible.

He paused in the alley. Still light, a ribbon of brightness directly above. It felt odd, to be outside in the day, and he knew it would not be long before someone caught sight of him, recognizing his face – eyes widening with astonishment – and word would race back to Seba Krafar. And then?

Well, the Master would probably send one of his lieutenants to sound Rallick out – what did he want? What did he expect from the Guild? There might be an invitation as well, the kind that was deadly either way. Accept it and walk into an ambush. Reject it and the hunt would begin. There were few who could take down Rallick one on one, but that wouldn't be the preferred tactic in any case. No, it would be a quarrel to the back.

There were other places he could hide – he could probably walk right back into the Finnest House. But then, Krute was not the only one getting impatient. Besides, Rallick had never much liked subterfuge. He'd not used it when he'd been active in the Guild, after all – except when he was working, of course.

No, the time had come to stir things awake. And if Seba Krafar's confidence had been rattled by a handful of rancorous Malazans, well, he was about to be sent reeling.

The notion brought a faint smile to Rallick's lips. *Yes, I am back.*

He set out for the Phoenix Inn.

*I am back, so let's get this started, shall we?*

Echoing alarms at the blurred border between the Daru and Lakefront districts, a half-dozen streets behind them now as Barathol – holding Chaur's hand as he would a child's – dragged the giant man through the late afternoon crowds. They had passed a few patrols, but word had yet to outdistance the two fugitives, although it was likely that this flight would, ultimately, prove anything but surreptitious – guards and bystanders both could not help but recall the two huge foreigners, one onyx-skinned, the other the hue of stained rawhide, rushing past.

Barathol had no choice but to dispense with efforts at stealth and subterfuge. Chaur was bawling with all the indignant outrage of a toddler unjustly punished, astonished to discover that not all things were cute and to be indulged by adoring caregivers – that, say, shoving a sibling off a cliff was not quite acceptable behaviour.

He had tried calming Chaur down, but simple as Chaur was, he was quick to sense disapproval, and Barathol had been unthinking and careless in expressing that disapproval – well, rather, he had been shocked into carelessness – and now the huge child would wail unto eventual exhaustion, and that exhaustion was still a long way off.

Two streets away from the harbour, three guards thirty paces behind them suddenly raised shouts, and now the chase was on for real.

To Barathol's surprise, Chaur fell silent, and the smith pulled him up alongside him as they hurried along. 'Chaur, listen to me. Get back to the ship – do you understand? Back to the ship, to the lady, yes? Back to Spite – she'll hide you. To the ship, Chaur, understand?'

A tear-streaked face, cheeks blotchy, eyes red, Chaur nodded.

Barathol pushed him ahead. 'Go. On your own – I'll catch up with you. Go!'

And Chaur went, lumbering, knocking people off their feet until a path miraculously opened before him.

Barathol turned about to give the three guards some trouble. Enough to purchase Chaur the time he needed, at least.

He managed that well enough, with fists and feet, with knees and elbows, and if not for the arrival of reinforcements, he might even have won clear. Six more guards, however, proved about five too many, and he was wrestled to the ground and beaten half senseless.

The occasional thought filtered weakly through the miasma of pain and confusion as he was roughly carried to the nearest gaol. He'd known a cell before. It wasn't so bad, so long as the gaolers weren't into torture. Yes, he could make a tour of gaol cells, country to country, continent to continent. All he needed to do was start up a smithy without the local Guild's approval.

Simple enough.

Then these fragmented notions went away, and the bliss of unconsciousness was unbroken, for a time.

"Tis the grand stupidity of our kind, dear Cutter, to see all the errors of our ways, yet find in ourselves the inability to do anything about them. We sit, dumbfounded by despair, and for all our ingenuity, our perceptivity, for all our extraordinary capacity to see the truth of things, we hunker down like snails in a flood, sucked tight to our precious pebble, fearing the moment it is dislodged beneath us. Until that terrible calamity, we do nothing but cling.

'Can you even imagine a world where all crimes are punished, where justice is truly blind and holds out no hands happy to yield to the weight of coin and influence? Where one takes responsibility for his or her mistakes, acts of negligence, the deadly consequences of indifference or laziness? Nay, instead we slip and duck, dance and dodge, dance the dodge slip duck dance, feet ablur! Our selves transformed into shadows that flit in chaotic discord. We are indeed masters of evasion – no doubt originally a survival trait, at least in the physical sense, but to have such instincts applied to the soul is perhaps our most egregious crime against morality. What we will do so that we may continue living with ourselves. In this we might assert that a survival trait can ultimately prove its own antithesis, and in the cancelling out thereof, why, we are left with the blank, dull, vacuous expression that Kruppe now sees before him.'

'Sorry, what?'

'Dear Cutter, this is a grave day, I am saying. A day of the misguided and the misapprehended, a day of mischance and misery. A day in which to grieve the unanticipated, this yawning stretch of too-late that follows fell decisions, and the stars will plummet and if we truly possessed courage we would ease ourselves with great temerity into that high, tottering footwear of the gods, and in seeing what they see, in knowing what they have come to know, we would at last comprehend the madness of struggle, the absurdity of hope, and off we would stumble, wailing our way into the dark future. We would weep, my friend, we would weep.'

'Maybe I have learned all about killing,' Cutter said in a mumble, his glazy eyes seemingly fixed on the tankard in his hand. 'And maybe assassins don't spare a thought as to who deserves what, or even motivations. Coin in hand, or love in the heart – reward has so many . . . flavours. But is this what she really wants? Or was that some kind of careless . . . burst, like a flask never meant to be opened – shatters, everything pours out – staining your hands, staining . . . everything.'

'Cutter,' said Kruppe in a low, soft but determined tone. *'Cutter.* You must listen to Kruppe, now. You must listen – he is done with rambling, with his own bout of terrible, grievous helplessness. Listen! Cutter, there are paths that must not be walked. Paths where going back is impossible – no matter how deeply you would wish it, no matter how loud the cry in your soul. Dearest friend, you must—'

Shaking himself, Cutter rose suddenly. 'I need a walk,' he said. 'She couldn't have meant it. That future she paints . . . it's a fairy tale. Of course it is. Has to be. No, and no, and no. But . . .'

Kruppe watched as the young man walked away, watched as Cutter slipped through the doorway of the Phoenix Inn, and was gone from sight.

'Sad truth,' Kruppe said – his audience of none sighing in agreement – 'that a tendency towards verbal excess can so defeat the precision of meaning. That intent can be so well disguised in majestic plethora of nuance, of rhythm both serious and mocking, of this penchant for self-referential slyness, that the unwitting simply skip on past – imagining their time to be so precious, imagining themselves above all manner of conviction, save that of their own witty perfection. Sigh and sigh again.

'See Kruppe totter in these high shoes – nay, even his balance is not always precise, no matter how condign he may be in so many things. Totter, I say, as down fall the stars and off wail the gods and helplessness is an ocean in flood, ever rising – but we shall not drown alone, shall we? No, we shall have plenty of company in this chill comfort. The guilty and the innocent, the quick and the thick, the wise and the dumb, the righteous and the wicked – the flood levels all, faces down in the swells, oh my.

'Oh my . . .'

A miracle, better than merely recounted second or third hand – witnessed. Witnessed: the four bearers would have carried their charge directly past, but then – see – a gnarled, feeble hand reached out, damp fingertips pressing against Myrla's forehead.

And the bearers – who were experienced in such random gestures of deliverance – halted.

She stared up into the Prophet's eyes and saw terrible pain, a misery so profound it purified, and knowledge beyond anything her useless, dross-filled mind could comprehend. 'My son,' she gasped. 'My son . . . my self – oh my heart—'

'Self, yes,' he said, fingers pressing against her forehead like four iron nails, pinning her guilt and shame, her weakness, her useless stupidity. 'I can bless that. So I shall. Do you feel my touch, dear woman?'

And Myrla could not but nod, for she did feel it, oh, yes, she felt it.

From behind her Bedek's quavering voice drifted past. 'Glorious One – our son has been taken. Kidnapped. We know not where, and we thought, we thought . . .'

'Your son is beyond salvation,' said the Prophet. 'He has the vileness of knowledge within his soul. I can sense how you two merged in his creation – yes, your blood was his poison of birth. He understands compassion, but he chooses it not. He understands love, but uses it as a weapon. He understands the future, and knows it does not wait for anyone, not even him. He is a living maw, your son, a living maw, which all of the world must feed.'

The hand withdrew, leaving four precise spots of ice on Myrla's forehead – every nerve dead there, for ever more. 'Even the Crippled God must reject such a creature. But you, Myrla, and you, Bedek, I bless. I bless you both in your lifelong blindness, your insensitive touch, the fugue of your malnourished minds. I bless you in the crumpling of the two delicate flowers in your hands – your two girls – for you have made of them

versions no different from you, no better, perhaps much worse. Myrla. Bedek. I bless you in the name of empty pity. Now go.'

And she staggered back, stumbled into the cart, knocking it and Bedek over. He cried out, falling hard on to the cobbles, and a moment later she landed on top of him. The snap of his left arm was loud in the wake of the now-resumed procession of bearers and Prophet, the swirling press of begging worshippers sweeping in, stepping without care, without regard. A heavy boot stamped down on Myrla's hip and she shrieked as something broke, lancing agony into her right leg. Another foot collided with her face, toenails slashing one cheek. Heels on hands, fingers, ankles.

Bedek caught a momentary glimpse upward, to see the face of a man desperate to climb over them, for they were in his way and he wanted to reach the Prophet, and the man looked down, his pleading expression transforming into one of black hate. And he drove the point of his boot into Bedek's throat, crushing the trachea.

Unable to breathe past the devastation that had once been his throat, Bedek stared up with bulging eyes. His face deepened to a shade of blue-grey, and then purple. The awareness in the eyes flattened out, went away, and away.

Still screaming, Myrla dragged herself over her husband – noting his stillness but otherwise uncomprehending – and pulled herself through a forest of hard, shifting legs – shins and knees, jabbing feet, out into a space, suddenly open, clear, the cobbles slick beneath her.

Although she was not yet aware of them, four spots of gangrene were spreading across her forehead – she could smell something foul, horribly foul, as though someone had dropped something in passing, somewhere close; she just couldn't see it yet. The pain of her broken hip was now a throbbing thing, a deadweight she dragged behind her, growing ever more distant in her mind.

We run from our place of wounding. No different from any other beast, we run from our place of wounding. Run, or crawl, crawl or drag, drag or

reach. She realized that even such efforts had failed her. She was broken everywhere. She was dying.

*See me? I have been blessed. He has blessed me.*

*Bless you all.*

He could barely stand, and now he must duel. Murillio untied his coin pouch and tossed it towards the foreman who had just returned, gasping and red-faced. The bag landed in a cloud of dust, a heavy thud. 'I came for the boy,' Murillio said. 'That's more than he's worth – do you accept the payment, foreman?'

'He does not,' said Gorlas. 'No, I have something special in mind for little Harllo.'

'He's not part of any of this—'

'You just made him so, Murillio. One of your clan, maybe even a whelp of one of your useless friends in the Phoenix Inn – your favoured hangout, yes? Hanut knows everything there is to know about you. No, the boy's in this, and that's why you won't have him. I will, to do with as I please.'

Murillio drew his rapier. 'What makes people like you, Gorlas?'

'I could well ask the same of you.'

*Well, a lifetime of mistakes. And so we are perhaps more alike than either of us would care to admit.* He saw the foreman bend down to collect the purse. The odious man hefted it and grinned. 'About those interest payments, Councillor . . .'

Gorlas smiled. 'Why, it seems you can clear your debt after all.'

Murillio assumed his stance, point extended, sword arm bent slightly at the elbow, left shoulder thrown back to reduce the plane of his exposed torso. He settled his weight, gingerly, down through the centre of his hips.

Smiling still, Gorlas Vidikas moved into a matching pose, although he was leaning slightly forward. Not a duellist ready to retreat, then. Murillio recalled that from the fight he'd seen the very end of, the way Gorlas would

not step back, unwilling to yield ground, unwilling to accept that sometimes pulling away earned advantages. No, he would push, and push, surrendering nothing.

He rapped Murillio's blade with his own, a contemptuous batting aside to gauge response.

There was none. Murillio simply resumed his line.

Gorlas probed with the rapier's point, jabbing here and there round the bell hilt, teasing and gambling with the quillons that could trap his blade, but for Murillio to do so he would have to twist and fold his wrist – not much, but enough for Gorlas to make a darting thrust into the opened guard, and so Murillio let the man play with that. He was in no hurry; footsore and weary as he was, he suspected he would have but one solid chance, sooner or later, to end this. Point to lead kneecap, or down to lead boot, or a flicking slash into wrist tendons, crippling the sword arm – possibly for ever. Or higher, into the shoulder, stop-hitting a lunge.

Gorlas pressed, closing the distance, and Murillio stepped back.

And that *hurt*.

He could feel wetness in his boots, that wretched clear liquid oozing out from the broken blisters.

'I think,' ventured Gorlas, 'there's something wrong with your feet, Murillio. You move like a man standing on nails.'

Murillio shrugged. He was past conversation; it was hard enough concentrating through the stabs of pain.

'Such an old-style stance you have, old man. So . . . upright.' Gorlas resumed the flitting, wavering motions of his rapier, minute threats here and there. He had begun a rhythmic rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, attempting to lull Murillio into that motion.

When he finally launched into his attack, the move was explosive, lightning fast.

Murillio tracked the feints, caught and parried the lunge, and snapped out a riposte – but he was stepping back as he did so, and his point snipped the cloth of Gorlas's sleeve. Before he could ready himself, the younger duellist extended his attack with a hard parrying beat and then a second lunge, throwing his upper body far forward – closing enough to make Murillio's retreat insufficient, as was his parry.

Sizzling fire in his left shoulder. Staggering back, the motion tugging the point free of his flesh, Murillio righted himself and then straightened. 'Blood drawn,' he said, voice tightened by pain.

'Oh, that,' said Gorlas, resuming his rocking motion once more, 'I've changed my mind.'

*One insult too many. I never learn.*

Murillio felt his heart pounding. The scar of his last, near fatal wounding seemed to be throbbing as if eager to reopen. He could feel blood pulsing down from his pierced shoulder muscle, could feel warm trickles running down the length of his upper arm to soak the cloth at his elbow.

'Blood drawn,' he repeated. 'As you guessed, I am in no shape to duel beyond that, Gorlas. We were agreed, before a witness.'

Gorlas glanced over at his foreman. 'Do you recall, precisely, what you heard?'

The old man shrugged. 'Thought there was something about wounding . . .'

Gorlas frowned.

The foreman cleared his throat. '. . . but that's all. A discussion, I think. I heard nothing, er, firmed up between you.'

Gorlas nodded. 'Our witness speaks.'

A few hundred onlookers in the pit below were making restless sounds. Murillio wondered if Harllo was among them.

'Ready yourself,' Gorlas said.

So, it was to be this way. A decade past Murillio would have been standing over this man's corpse, regretful, of course, wishing it all could have been handled peacefully. And that was the luxury of days gone past, that cleaner world, while everything here, now, ever proved so . . . messy.

*I didn't come here to die this day. I'd better do something about that. I need to survive this. For Harllo.* He resumed his stance. Well, he was debilitated, enough to pretty much ensure that he would fight defensively, seeking only ripostes and perhaps a counter-attack – taking a wound to deliver a death. All of that would be in Gorlas's mind, would shape his tactics. Time, then, to surprise the bastard.

His step and lunge was elegant, a fluid forward motion rather quick for a man his age. Gorlas, caught on the forward tilt of his rocking, was forced to jump a half-step back, parrying hard and without precision. His riposte was wild and inaccurate, and Murillio caught it with a high parry of his own, following through with a second attack – the one he had wanted to count from the very first – a fully extended lunge straight for his opponent's chest – heart or lungs, it didn't matter which—

But somehow, impossibly, Gorlas had stepped close, inside and to one side of that lunge – his half-step back had not been accompanied by any shift in weight, simply a repositioning of his upper body, and this time his thrust was not at all wild.

Murillio caught a flash along the length of Daru steel, and then he could not breathe. Something was pouring down the front of his chest, and spurting up into his mouth.

He felt part of his throat tearing from the inside out as Gorlas slashed his blade free and stepped to the right.

Murillio twisted round to track him, but the motion lost all control, and he continued on, legs collapsing under him, and now he was lying on the stony ground.

The world darkened.

He heard Gorlas say something, possibly regretful, but probably not.

*Oh, Harllo, I am so sorry. So sorry—*

And the darkness closed in.

He was rocked momentarily awake by a kick to his face, but that pain quickly flushed away, along with everything else.

Gorlas Vidikas stood over Murillio's corpse. 'Get that carter to take the body back,' he said to the foreman, bending down to clean his blade on the threadbare silk sleeve of his victim's weapon arm. 'Have him deliver it to the Phoenix Inn, rapier and all.'

From the pit below, people were cheering and clanging their tools like some ragtag mob of barbarians. Gorlas faced them and raised his weapon in salute. The cheering redoubled. He turned back to the foreman. 'An extra tankard of ale for the crews tonight.'

'They will toast your name, Councillor!'

'Oh, and have someone collect the boy for me.'

'It's his shift in the tunnels, I think, but I can send someone to get him.'

'Good, and they don't have to be gentle about it, either. But make sure – nothing so bad he won't recover. If they kill him, I will personally disembowel every one of them – make sure they understand.'

'I will, Councillor.' The foreman hesitated. 'I never seen such skill, I never seen such skill – I thought he had you—'

'I'm sure he thought so, too. Go find that carter, now.'

'On my way, Councillor.'

'Oh, and I'll take that purse, so we're clear.'

The foreman rushed over to deliver it. Feeling the bag's weight for the first time, Gorlas raised his brows – a damned year's wages for this foreman, right here – probably all Murillio had, cleaned right out. Three times as much as the interest this fool owed him. Then again, if the foreman had stopped to count out the right amount, intending to keep the rest, well,

Gorlas would have had two bodies to dispose of rather than just one, so maybe the old man wasn't so stupid after all.

It had, Gorlas decided, been a good day.

And so the ox began its long journey back into the city, clumping along the cobbled road, and in the cart's bed lay the body of a man who might have been precipitous, who might indeed have been too old for such deadly ventures, but no one could say that his heart had not been in the right place. Nor could anyone speak of a lack of courage.

Raising a most grave question – if courage and heart are not enough, what is?

The ox could smell blood, and liked it not one bit. It was a smell that came with predators, with hunters, notions stirring the deepest parts of the beast's brain. It could smell death as well, there in its wake, and no matter how many clumping steps it took, that smell did not diminish, and this it could not understand, but was resigned to none the less.

There was no room in the beast for grieving. The only sorrow it knew was for itself. So unlike its two-legged masters.

Flies swarmed, ever unquestioning, and the day's light fell away.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He is unseen, one in a crowd whom none call
Do not slip past that forgettable face
Crawl not inside to find the unbidden rill
As it flows in dark horror from place to place

He is a common thing, in no way singular
Who lets no one inside the uneven steps
Down those eyes that drown the solitary star
We boldly share in these human depths

Not your brother, not anyone's saviour
He will loom only closer to search your clothes
Push aside the feeble hand that seeks to stir
Compassion's glow (the damp, dying rose)

He has plucked his garden down to bone
And picked every last bit of warm flesh
With fear like claws and nervous teeth when alone
He wanders this wasteland of cinder and ash

I watch in terror as he ascends our blessed throne
To lay down his cloak of shame like a shroud
And beckons us the illusion of a warm home
A sanctuary beneath his notice, one in a crowd

He finds his power in our indifference
Shredding the common to dispense with congress
No conjoined will to set against him in defiance
And one by one by one, he kills us

*A King Takes the Throne*
(carved on the Poet's Wall,
Royal Dungeons, Unta)

With a twist and a snarl, Shan turned on Lock. The huge white-coated beast did not flinch or scurry, but simply loped away, tongue lolling as if in laughter. A short distance off, Pallid watched. Fangs still bared, Shan slipped off into the high grasses once more.

Baran, Blind, Rood and Gear had not slowed during this exchange – it had happened many times before, after all – and they continued on, in a vaguely crescent formation, Rood and Gear on the flanks. Antelope observed them from a rise off to the southwest – the barest tilt of a head from any of the Hounds and they would be off, fast as their bounding legs could take them, their hearts a frenzied drum-roll of bleak terror.

But the Hounds of Shadow were not hunting this day. Not antelope, not bhederin, nor mule deer nor ground sloth. A host of animals that lived either in states of blessed anonymity or states of fear had no need to lurch from the former into the latter – at least not because of the monstrous Hounds. As for the wolves of the plains, the lumbering snub-nosed bears and the tawny cats of the high grasses, there were none within ten leagues – the faintest wisp of scent had sent them fleeing one and all.

Great Ravens sailed high above the Hounds, minute specks in the vaulted blue.

Shan was displeased with the two new companions, these blots of dirty white with the lifeless eyes. Lock in particular irritated her, as it seemed this one wanted to travel as she did, close by her side, sliding unseen, ghostly and silent. Most annoying of all, Lock was Shan's able match in such skill.

But she had no interest in surrendering her solitude. Ambush and murder were best served alone, as far as she was concerned. Lock complicated things, and Shan despised complications.

Somewhere, far behind them, creatures pursued. In the profoundly long history of the Hounds of Shadow, they had been hunted many times. More often than not, the hunters came to regret the decision, whether a momentary impulse or an instinctive need; whether at the behest of some master or by the hatred in their souls, their desire usually proved fatal.

Occasionally, however, being hunted was such exquisite pleasure that the Hounds never turned the game. Let the chase go on, and on. Dance from the path of that rage, all that blind need.

All things will cast a shadow. If light blazes infernal, a shadow can grow solid, outlines sharp, motion rippling within. Shape is a reflection, but not all reflections are true. Some shadows lie. Deception born of imagination and imagination born of fear, or perhaps it is the other way round and fear ignites imagination – regardless, shadows will thrive.

In the dark conjurings of a sentient mind, all that is imagined can be made real. The beast, and the shadow it casts. The beast's shadow, and the light from which it is born. Each torn away, made distinct, made into things of nightmare.

Philosophers and fools might claim that light is without shape, that it finds its existence in painting the shape of other things, as wayward as the opening of an eye. That, in the absence of such things, it slants unseen, indeed, invisible. Without other things to strike upon, it does not cavort, does not bounce, does not paint and reflect. Rather, it flows eternal. If this is so, then light is unique in the universe.

But the universe holds to one law above all others: *nothing is unique.*

Fools and philosophers have not, alas, seen the light.

Conjure the shapes of beasts, of Hounds and monsters, fiends and nightmares. Of light, of dark, and of shadow. A handful of clay, a gifted breath of life, and forces will seethe in the conflicts inscribed upon their souls.

The Deragoth are the dark, and in their savage solidity would claim ownership of the shadows they cast. Lock and Pallid, however, are the light that gave the Deragoth shape, without whom neither the Deragoth nor the Hounds of Shadow would exist. If the hunters and the hunted so will, one day the beasts shall come together, baleful in mutual regard, perhaps even eager to annihilate one another, and then, in a single instant of dumbfounded astonishment, vanish one and all. Ha hah.

Not all instincts guide one to behaviours of survival. Life is mired in stupidity, after all, and the smarter the life, the stupider it can be. The Hounds of Shadow were neither brilliant nor brainless. They were, in fact, rather clever.

Salutations to this tripartite universe, so mutually insistent. And why not? It doesn't even exist, except in the caged mind that so needs simplification.

A mind, mused Cotillion, *like mine.*

He glanced across at his companion. *But not his. When you stand at the centre of the game, no questions arise. How can that be? What is it like, to be the storm's eye? What happens, dear Shadowthrone, when you blink?*

'This,' muttered Shadowthrone, 'was unexpected.'

'A damned complication,' Cotillion agreed. 'We need the Hounds there, just to ensure nothing goes awry.'

Shadowthrone snorted. 'It always goes awry. Gods below, I've had to use that mad High Priest again.'

'Iskaral Pust.' After a moment, Cotillion realized he was smiling. He quickly cast away that expression, since if Shadowthrone saw it he might well go apoplectic. 'Lovely as she is, Sordiko Qualm is not insurance enough, not for this, anyway.'

'Nor is Pust!' snapped Shadowthrone.

They watched the Hounds drawing closer, sensed the beasts' collective curiosity at this unplanned intercession. Their task now, after all, was simple. Straightforward, even.

Cotillion glanced back over his shoulder, eyes narrowing on the gaunt figure walking towards them. Well, not precisely – the stranger was on his way to a damned reunion, and what would come of that?

'Too many histories, too many half-truths and outright lies.' Shadowthrone snarled every word of that statement. 'Pups of the Tiste Edur – any one will do, it seems, if they know the old commands. But now . . .'

'According to my, er, research, its name is Tulas Shorn, and no, I do not know the gender and what seems to be left of it doesn't look as if it will provide enough detail to decide either way.'

Shadowthrone grunted, and then said, 'At least it's sembled – oh, how I hate dragons! If vermin had a throne, they'd be on it.'

'Everywhere there's a mess, they're in the middle of it, all right. Eleint, Soletaken – hardly a difference, when it comes to trouble.'

'The chaos of their blood, Cotillion. Imagine how dull it would be without them . . . and I so cherish dullness.'

*If you say so.*

'So,' Shadowthrone resumed, 'how does all this fit with your ridiculously convoluted theories?'

'They're only convoluted because they are without substance – if you'll kindly excuse that inadvertent pun. Light, Dark, Shadow. Hounds of this and that and that. These beasts may exist only because of semantics.'

Shadowthrone snorted. 'You don't have to clean up after them – the only possible excuse for such an idiotic suggestion. They smell, they slaver and slobber, they scratch and they lick, Cotillion. Oh, and they tear things to pieces. When it suits them.'

'Because we expect them to.'

'Really now.'

'Listen – what was the mess behind the origin of the Deragoth? Wild beasts from the dusty aeons of past ages, seven left in all the world, and the First Emperor – who was anything but – chooses them as the repositories of his divided soul. All very well, but then we have the Hounds of Shadow, and, presumably, the Hounds of Light—'

'They're just damned albinos, Cotillion, a detail probably irrelevant, and besides, there're only two of them—'

'That we know of, and we know of them only because they wandered into our realm – why? What or who summoned them?'

'I did, of course.'

'How?'

Shadowthrone shrugged. 'I mused out loud on the need for . . . replacements.'

'And that constitutes summoning? I believe I have also heard you musing on the "need" for a breathlessly beautiful Queen of Shadow, a slave to your every desire—'

'You were hiding behind the curtain! I knew it!'

'The point is, where is she?'

The question was left unanswered, as Tulas Shorn had arrived, halting ten paces before them. 'It seems,' the undead Tiste Edur said, 'my Hounds have found new . . . pets.'

'Saw his head off, Cotillion,' Shadowthrone said. 'I hate him already.'

Shan slid up beside Cotillion, eyes fixed on Tulas Shorn. A moment later Baran, Rood, Blind and Gear arrived, padding round the rulers of the Realm of Shadow, and onward to encircle the Tiste Edur.

Who held out his hands, as if inviting the beasts to draw close.

None did.

'They preferred you living, I think,' Cotillion observed. 'The dead surrender so much.'

'If only my sentiments were dead,' Tulas Shorn said, then sighed as it lowered its hands to its sides once more. 'Still, it pleases me to see them. But two are missing.'

At that Cotillion glanced round. 'Well, you're right.'

'Killed?'

'Killed,' confirmed Shadowthrone.

'Who?'

'Anomander Rake.'

At the name Tulas Shorn started.

'Still around,' said Shadowthrone, 'yes. Hee hee. Houndslayer.'

'And neither of you strong enough to avenge the slayings, it seems. I am astonished that my Hounds have accepted such feeble masters.'

'I thought it was pets. No matter. Ganrod and Doan died because they were precipitate. Blame poor training. I do.'

'I am of a mind to test you,' said Tulas Shorn after a moment.

'You want the Throne of Shadow, do you?'

'My first rule was cut short. I have learned since—'

'Hardly. You died.' Shadowthrone waved one ephemeral hand. 'Whatever you learned, you did not learn well enough. Obviously.'

'You seem certain of that.'

'He is,' said Cotillion.

'Is it simply megalomania, then, that so afflicts him?'

'Well, yes, but that's beside the point.'

'And what is the point?'

'That you clearly have not learned anything worthwhile.'

'And why do you say that?'

'Because you've just said that you were of a mind to test us.'

Tulas Shorn cocked its head. 'Do you imagine the Hounds will defend you?'

'These ones? Probably not.'

'Then—' But the rest of his statement was left unfinished, as Lock and Pallid arrived, heads low, hackles upright like spines, to flank Shadowthrone and Cotillion. Upon seeing them, Tulas Shorn stepped back. 'By the Abyss,' it whispered, 'have you two lost your minds? They cannot be here – they must not be among you—'

'Why?' Cotillion demanded, leaning forward in sudden interest.

But the Tiste Edur simply shook its head.

The two bone-white Hounds looked barely restrained, moments from exploding into a deadly charge. The hate was avid in their eyes.

*'Why?'* Cotillion asked again.

'The . . . implacability of forces – we think to tame, but the wildness remains. Control is a delusion in the mind of self-proclaimed *masters*.' And that last word dripped with contempt. 'The leash, you fools, is *frayed* – don't you understand anything at all?'

'Perhaps—'

Tulas Shorn lifted both hands again, but this time in a warding gesture. 'We thought the same, once. We'd deceived ourselves into thinking we were the masters, that every force bowed to our command. And what happened? *They destroyed everything!'*

'I don't—'

'Understand? *I see that!* They are conjurations – manifestations – they exist to warn you. They are the proof that all that you think to enslave *will turn on you*.' And it backed away. 'The end begins again, it begins again.'

Cotillion stepped forward. 'Light, Dark and Shadow – these three – are you saying—' 'Three?' Tulas Shorn laughed with savage bitterness. 'What then of Life? Fire and Stone and Wind? What, you fools, of the Hounds of Death? Manifestations, I said. *They will turn – they are telling you that! That is why they exist! The fangs, the fury – all that is implacable in nature – each aspect but a variation, a hue in the maelstrom of destruction!'*

Tulas Shorn was far enough away now, and the Tiste Edur began veering into a dragon.

As one, all seven Hounds surged forward – but they were too late, as the enormous winged creature launched skyward, rising on a wave of appalling power that sent Cotillion staggering back; that blew through Shadowthrone until he seemed half shredded.

The Soletaken dragon rose higher, as if riding on a column of pure panic, or horror. Or dismay. A pillar reaching for the heavens. Far above, the Great Ravens scattered.

Recovering, Cotillion turned on Shadowthrone. 'Are we in trouble?'

The ruler of High House Shadow slowly collected himself back into a vaguely human shape. 'I can't be sure,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Why, because I blinked.'

Up ahead, the Hounds had resumed their journey. Lock loped a tad too close alongside Shan and she snarled the beast off.

Tongue lolled, jaw hanging in silent laughter.

So much for lessons in hubris.

There were times, Kallor reflected, when he despised his own company. The day gloried in its indifference, the sun a blinding blaze tracking the turgid crawl of the landscape. The grasses clung to the hard earth the way they always did, seeds drifting on the wind as if on sighs of hope. Tawny rodents stood sentinel above warren holes and barked warnings as he marched past. The shadows of circling hawks rippled across his path every now and then.

Despising himself was, oddly enough, a comforting sensation, for he knew he was not alone in his hate. He could recall times, sitting on a throne as if he and it had merged into one, as immovable and inviolate as one of the matching statues outside the palace (any one of his innumerable palaces), when he would feel the oceanic surge of hate's tide. His subjects,

tens, hundreds of thousands, each and every one wishing him dead, cast down, torn to pieces. Yet what had he been but the perfect, singular representative of all that they despised within themselves? Who among them would not eagerly take his place? Casting down foul judgements upon all whose very existence offended?

He had been, after all, the very paragon of acquisitiveness. Managing to grasp what others could only reach for, to gather into his power a world's arsenal of weapons, and reshape that world in hard cuts, to make of it what he willed – not one would refuse to take his place. Yes, they could hate him; indeed, they *must* hate him, for he embodied the perfection of success, and his very existence mocked their own failures. And the violence he delivered? Well, watch how it played out in smaller scenes everywhere – the husband who cannot satisfy his wife, so he beats her down with his fists. The streetwise adolescent bully, pinning his victim to the cobbles and twisting the hapless creature's arm. The noble walking past the starving beggar. The thief with the avaricious eye – no, none of these is any different, not in their fundamental essence.

So, hate Kallor even as he hates himself. Even in that, he will do it better. Innate superiority expressed in all manner of ways. See the world gnash its teeth – he answers with a most knowing smile.

He walked, the place where he had begun far, far behind him now, and the place to where he was going drawing ever closer, step by step, as inexorable as this crawling landscape. Let the sentinels bark, let the hawks muse with wary eye. Seeds ride his legs, seeking out new worlds. He walked, and in his mind memories unfolded like worn packets of parchment, seamed and creased; scurried up from the bottom of some burlap sack routed as rats, crackling as they opened up in a rain of flattened moths and insect carcasses.

Striding white-faced and blood-streaked down a jewel-studded hallway, dragging by an ankle the corpse of his wife – just one in a countless succession – her arms trailing behind her limp as dead snakes, their throats slashed open. There had been no warning, no patina of dust covering her eyes when she fixed him with their regard that morning, as he sat ordering

the Century Candles in a row on the table between them. As he invited her into a life stretched out, the promise of devouring for ever – no end to the feast awaiting them, no need ever to exercise anything like restraint. They would speak and live the language of excess. They would mark out the maps of interminable expansion, etching the ambitions they could now entertain. Nothing could stop them, not even death itself.

Some madness had afflicted her, like the spurt and gush of a nicked artery – there could be no other cause. Madness it had been. Insanity, to have flung away so much. Of what he offered her. So much, yes, of *him.* Or so he had told himself at the time, and for decades thereafter. It had been easier that way.

He knew now why she had taken her own life. To be offered *everything* was to be shown what she herself was capable of – the depthless reach of her potential depravity, the horrors she would entertain, the plucking away of every last filament of sensitivity, leaving her conscience smooth, cool to the touch, a thing maybe alive, maybe not, a thing nothing could prod awake. She had seen, yes, just how far she might take herself . . . and had then said *no.*

Another sweet packet, unfolding with the scent of flowers. He knelt beside Vaderon, his war horse, as the animal bled out red foam, its one visible eye fixed on him, as if wanting to know: was it all worth this? What has my life purchased you, my blood, the end of my days?

A battlefield spread out on all sides. Heaps of the dead and the dying, human and beast, Jheck and Tartheno Toblakai, a scattering of Forkrul Assail each one surrounded by hundreds of the fallen, the ones protecting their warleaders, the ones who failed in taking the demons down. And there was no dry ground, the blood was a shallow sea thickening in the heat, and more eyes looked upon nothing than scanned the nightmare seeking friends and kin.

Voices cried, but they seemed distant – leagues away from Kallor where he knelt beside Vaderon, unable to pull his gaze from that one fixating eye. Promises of brotherhood, flung into the crimson mud. Silent vows of honour, courage, service and reward, all streaming down the broken spear

shaft jutting from the animal's massive, broad chest. And yes, Vaderon had reared to take that thrust, a thrust aimed at Kallor himself, because this horse was too stupid to understand anything.

That Kallor had begun this war, had welcomed the slaughter, the mayhem.

That Kallor, this master now kneeling at its side, was in truth a brutal, despicable man, a bag of skin filled with venom and spite, with envy and a child's selfish snarl that in losing took the same from everyone else.

Vaderon, dying. Kallor, dry-eyed and damning himself for his inability to weep. To feel regret, to sow self-recrimination, to make promises to do better the next time round.

I am as humankind, he often told himself. Impervious to lessons. Pitiful in loss and defeat, vengeful in victory. With every possible virtue vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by others, could they claim dominion, until such virtues became hollow things, sweating beads of poison. I hold forth goodness and see it made vile, and do nothing, voice no complaint, utter no disavowal. The world I make I have made for one single purpose – to chew me up, me and everyone else. Do not believe this bewildered expression. I am bemused only through stupidity, but the clever among me know better, oh, yes they do, even as they lie through my teeth, to you and to themselves.

Kallor walked, over one shoulder a burlap sack ten thousand leagues long and bulging with folded packets. So different from everyone else. Ghost horses run at his side. Wrist-slashed women show bloodless smiles, dancing round the rim of deadened lips. And where dying men cry, see his shadow slide past.

'I want things plain,' said Nenanda. 'I don't want to have to work.' And then he looked up, belligerent, quick to take affront.

Skintick was bending twigs to make a stick figure. 'But things aren't plain, Nenanda. They never are.'

'I know that, just say it straight, that's all.'

'You don't want your confusion all stirred up, you mean.'

Nimander roused himself. 'Skin—'

But Nenanda had taken the bait – and it was indeed bait, since for all that Skintick had seemed intent on his twigs, he had slyly noted Nenanda's diffidence. 'Liars *like* confusion. Liars and thieves, because they can slip in and slip out, when there's confusion. They want your uncertainty, but there's nothing uncertain in what *they* want, is there? That's how they use you – you're like that yourself sometimes, Skintick, with your clever words.'

'Wait, how can they use me if I am them?'

Desra snorted.

Nenanda's expression filled with fury and he would have risen, if not for Aranatha's gentle hand settling on his arm, magically dispelling his rage.

Skintick twisted the arms of the tiny figure until they were above the knotted head with its lone green leaf, and held it up over the fire so that it faced Nenanda. 'Look,' he said, 'he surrenders.'

'Do not mock me, Skintick.'

'On the contrary, I applaud your desire to have things simple. After all, either you can cut it with your sword or you can't.'

'There you go again.'

The bickering would go on half the night, Nimander knew. And as it went on it would unravel, and Skintick would increasingly make Nenanda into a thick-witted fool, when he was not anything of the sort. But words were indeed ephemeral, able to sleet past all manner of defences, quick to cut, eager to draw blood. They were the perfect weapons of deceit, but they could also be, he well knew, the solid pavestones of a path leading to comprehension – or what passed for comprehension in this murky, impossible world.

There were so many ways to live, one for every single sentient being – and perhaps for the non-sentient ones too – that it was a true miracle whenever two could meet in mutual understanding, or even passive acceptance. Proof, Skintick had once said, of life's extraordinary flexibility.

*But then*, he had added, *it is our curse to be social creatures, so we've little choice but to try to get along.*

They were camped on a broad terrace above the last of the strange ruins – the day's climb had been long, dusty and exhausting. Virtually every stone in the rough gravel filling the old drainage channels proved to be some sort of fossil – pieces of what had once been bone, wood, tooth or tusk – all in fragments. The entire mountainside seemed to be some sort of midden, countless centuries old, and to imagine the lives needed to create so vast a mound was to feel bewildered, weakened with awe. Were the mountains behind this one the same? Was such a thing even possible?

*Can't you see, Nenanda, how* nothing *is simple? Not even the ground we walk upon. How is this created? Is what we come from and where we end up any different? No, that was badly put. Make it simpler. What is this existence?*

As Nenanda might answer, it does a warrior no good to ask such questions. Leave us this headlong plunge, leave to the moment to come that next step, even if it's over an abyss. There's no point in all these questions.

And how might Skintick respond to that? *Show a bhederin fear and watch it run off a cliff. What killed it? The jagged rocks below, or the terror that made it both blind and stupid?* And Nenanda would shrug. *Who cares? Let's just eat the damned thing.*

This was not the grand conflict of sensibilities one might think it was. *Just two heads on the same coin, one facing right on this side, the other facing left on the other side. Both winking.*

And Desra would snort and say, *Keep your stupid words, I'll take the cock in my hand over words any time.*

*Holding on for dear life*, Skintick would mutter under his breath, and Desra's answering smile fooled no one. Nimander well remembered every conversation among his followers, his siblings, his family, and remembered too how they could repeat themselves, with scant variation, if all the cues were triggered in the right sequence.

He wondered where Clip had gone to – somewhere out beyond this pool of firelight, perhaps listening, perhaps not. Would he hear anything he'd not heard before? Would anything said this night alter his opinion of them? It did not seem likely. They bickered, they rapped against personalities and spun off either laughing or infuriated. Prodding, skipping away, ever seeking where the skin was thinnest above all the old bruises. All just fighting without swords, and no one ever died, did they? Nimander watched Kedeviss – who had been unusually quiet thus far – rise and draw her cloak tighter about her shoulders. After a moment, she set off into the dark.

Somewhere in the crags far away, wolves began howling.

Something huge loomed just outside the flickering orange light, and Samar Dev saw both Karsa and Traveller twist round to face it, and then they rose, reaching for their weapons. The shape shifted, seemed to wag from side to side, and then – at the witch's eye level had she been standing – a glittering, twisting snout, a broad flattened halo of fur, the smear of fire in two small eyes.

Samar Dev struggled to breathe. She had never before seen such an enormous bear. If it reared, it would tower over even Karsa Orlong. She watched that uplifted head, the flattened nose testing the air. The creature, she realized, clearly relied more on smell than on sight. *I thought fire frightened such beasts – not summoned them.*

If it attacked, things would happen . . . fast. Two swords flashing into its lunge, a deafening bellow, talons scything to sweep away the two puny attackers – and then it would come straight for her. She could see that, was certain of it. The bear had come for her.

*De nek okral.* The words seemed to foam up to the surface of her thoughts, like things belched from the murky depths of instinct. 'De nek okral,' she whispered.

The nostrils flared, dripping.

And then, with a snuffling snort, the beast drew back, out of the firelight. A crunch of stones, and the ground trembled as the animal lumbered away.

Karsa and Traveller moved their hands away from their weapons, and then both eased back down, resuming their positions facing the fire.

The Toblakai warrior found a stick and dropped it into the flames. Sparks whirled skyward, bright with liberation, only to wink out. His expression looked thoughtful.

Samar Dev glanced down at her trembling hands, and then slipped them beneath the woollen blanket she had wrapped about herself.

'Strictly speaking,' said Traveller, 'not an okral. De nek . . .' He raised his brows. '"Short nose"?'

'How should I know?' Samar Dev snapped.

His brows lifted higher.

'I don't know where those words came from. They just . . . arrived.'

'They were Imass, Samar Dev.'

'Oh?'

*'Okral* is the word for a plains bear, but that was no plains bear – too big, legs too long—'

'I would not,' said Karsa, 'wish to be chased by that beast, even on horseback. That animal was built for running its prey down.'

'But it was not hunting,' said Traveller.

'I don't know what it was doing,' Karsa conceded with a loose shrug. 'But I am glad it changed its mind.'

'From you two,' Samar said, 'it would have sensed no fear. That alone would have made it hesitate.' Her voice was harsh, almost flinging the words out. She was not sure why she was so angry. Perhaps naught but the aftermath of terror – a terror that neither companion had the decency to have shared with her. They made her feel . . . diminished.

Traveller was still studying her, and she wanted to snarl at him. When he spoke, his tone was calm. 'The old gods of war are returning.'

'War? The god of war? That was Fener, wasn't it? The Boar.'

'Fener, Togg, Fanderay, Treach, and,' he shrugged, 'De nek Okral – who can say how many once existed. They arose, I would imagine, dependent on the environment of the worshippers – whatever beast was supreme predator, was the most savage—'

'But none were,' cut in Karsa Orlong. 'Supreme. That title belonged to us two-legged hunters, us bright-eyed killers.'

Traveller continued to stare at Samar Dev. 'The savagery of the beasts reflected the savagery in the souls of the worshippers. In war, this is what was shared. Boar, tigers, wolves, the great bears that knew no fear.'

'Is this what Fener's fall has done, then?' Samar Dev asked. 'All the hoary, forgotten ones clambering back to fight over the spoils? And what has that to do with that bear, anyway?'

'That bear,' said Traveller, 'was a god.'

Karsa spat into the fire. 'No wonder I have never before seen such a beast.'

'They once existed,' said Traveller. 'They once ruled these plains, until all that they hunted was taken from them, and so they vanished, as have so many other proud creatures.'

'The god should have followed them,' said Karsa. 'There are too many faces of war as it is.'

Samar Dev grunted. 'That's rich coming from you.'

Karsa eyed her over the flames, and then grinned, the crazed tattoos seeming to split wide open on his face. 'There need be only one.'

*Yours. Yes, Toblakai, I understand you well enough.* 'I have one true fear,' she said. 'And that is, when you are done with civilization, it will turn out that you as master of everything will prove no better than the ones you pulled down. That you will find the last surviving throne and plop yourself down on it, and find it all too much to your liking.'

'That is an empty fear, witch,' said Karsa Orlong. 'I will leave not one throne to sit on – I will shatter them all. And if, when I am done, I am the last left standing – in all the world – then I will be satisfied.'

'What of your people?'

'I have listened too long to the whispers of Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Our ways are but clumsier versions of all the other ways in which people live – their love of waste, their eagerness to reap every living thing as if it belonged to them, as if in order to prove ownership they must destroy it.' He bared his teeth. 'We think no differently, just slower. Less . . . efficiently. You will prattle on about progress, Samar Dev, but progress is not what you think it is. It is not a tool guided by our hands – not yours, not mine, not Traveller's. It is not something we can rightly claim as our destiny. Why? Because in truth we have no control over it. Not your machines, witch, not a hundred thousand slaves shackled to it – even as we stand with whips in hand.'

Now Traveller had turned slightly and was studying the Toblakai with that same curious wonder that she had seen before. 'What then,' he asked, 'is progress, Karsa Orlong?'

The Toblakai gestured into the night sky. 'The crawl of the stars, the plunge and rise of the moon. Day, night, birth, death – progress is the passage of reality. We sit astride this horse, but it is a beast we can never tame, and it will run for ever – we will age and wither and fall off, and it cares not. Some other will leap aboard and it cares not. It may run alone, and it cares not. It outran the great bears. The wolves and their worshippers. It outran the Jaghut, and the K'Chain Che'Malle. And still it runs on, and to it we are nothing.'

'Then why not let us ride it for a time?' Samar Dev demanded. 'Why not leave us that damned illusion?'

'Because, woman, we ride it to hunt, to kill, to destroy. We ride it as if it is our right and our excuse both.'

'And yet,' said Traveller, 'is that not precisely what you intend, Karsa Orlong?'

'I shall destroy what I can, but never shall I claim to own what I destroy. I will be the embodiment of progress, but emptied of greed. I shall be like nature's fist: blind. And I shall prove that ownership is a lie. The land, the seas, the life to be found there. The mountains, the plains, the cities, the farms. Water, air. We own none of it. This is what I will prove, and by proving it will make it so.'

He leaned forward then and gathered up in his hands a heap of dusty earth. The Toblakai rose to his feet, and dropped the soil on to the fire, snuffing out the flames. Darkness took them all, as if but awaiting this moment. Or, she thought with a chill, as if it has always been there. *The light blinded me, else I would have seen it.*

*As I do now.*

*God of war, what did you want with me?*

With an ear-piercing scream the enkaral crashed down on to Pearl, talons slashing through flesh, dagger fangs closing on the back of the demon's neck. Grunting, he reached up and closed one hand about the winged beast's throat, the other forcing its way beneath the enkaral's upper jaw – fingers sliced into shreds as he reached ever farther and then began prising the mouth back open. The fangs of the lower jaw sank deeper into the muscles of Pearl's neck, and still he pushed. As this was going on, the talons never ceased their frantic rending along the demon's lower back, seeking to hook round his spine, seeking to tear loose that column – but the chains and shackles snarled its efforts, as did Pearl's twisting to evade each stabbing search through his muscles.

Finally, as his grip on the beast's throat tightened, he could hear the desperate squeal of its breath, and the jaws weakened. Something crunched and all at once Pearl was able to rip the jaws free of his neck. He staggered forward, dragging the huge beast round, both hands closing on its scaled throat – and more things collapsed inside that crushing grip.

The enkaral flailed about, legs kicking wildly now, talons scoring furrows on Pearl's thighs. He forced the beast down on to the ground. The thrashing slowed, and then, with a spasm, the creature went limp.

Pearl slowly rose, flinging the carcass to one side; a thud, the slap and rustle of chains. The demon then glanced over to the figure walking alongside it. 'Did I anger it somehow, Draconus?'

The man squinted, shifting the weight of his chains over his other shoulder before replying, 'No, Pearl. Madness took it, that's all. You just happened to be near.'

'Oh,' said Pearl. And then the demon sighed. 'Then it is good it was me and not something . . . smaller.'

'Can you continue, Pearl?'

'I can, yes. Thank you for asking.'

'Not much longer, I should think.'

'No, not much longer,' agreed Pearl. 'And then?'

'We will see, won't we?'

'Yes, that is true. Draconus?'

'Pearl?'

'I think I will welcome an end – is that a terrible thing for me to say?'

The man shook his head, his expression hinting that he might be in pain. 'No, my friend, it is not.'

Fully one half of the sky was now a seething argent storm. Thunder rolled from the horizon behind them, as the very ground was ripped up, annihilated – their world had acquired an edge, raw as a cliff, and that cliff was drawing closer as vast sections sheared away, as the raging abyss swallowed the toppling stone columns one by one.

And it occurred to Draconus, then, that each of them here, seemingly alone, each with his or her own shackle, his or her own chain, had finally, at long last, come together.

*We are an army. But an army in retreat. See the detritus we leave in our wake, the abandoned comrades. See the glaze of our eyes, this veil of*

*numbed exhaustion – when at last we tear it aside, we will find the despair we have harboured for so long, like a black poisoned fruit under a leaf – all revealed as we look into each other's eyes.*

Was the comfort found in mutual recognition of any true worth? Here, at the last? When the common ground is failure? *Like a field of corpses after a battle. Like a sea of skulls rolling in the tide. Is not the brotherhood too bitter to bear?*

And now, he wanted to . . . *to what? Yes, to rage, but first, let me close my eyes. Just for a moment. Let me find, again, my will—*

'Draconus?'

'Yes, Pearl?'

'Do you hear drums? I hear drums.'

'The thunder—' and then he stopped, and turned round, to look back at that fulminating, crazed horizon.

*'Gods below.'*

Chaos had found a new way to mock them. With legions in ranks, weapons and armour blazing, with standards spitting lightning into the sky. Emerging in an endless row, an army of something vaguely human, shaped solely by intent, in numbers unimaginable – they did not march so much as flow, like a frothing surge devouring the ground – and no more than a league away. Lances and pike heads flashing, round shields spinning like vortices. Drums like rattling bones, rushing to swarm like maddened wasps.

*So close . . . has the hunger caught fresh our scent – does the hunger now rush to us, faster than ever before?*

*Is there something in that storm . . . that knows what it wants?*

'I do not understand,' said Pearl. 'How can chaos take shapes?'

'Perhaps, friend, what we are seeing is the manifestation of what exists in all of us. Our secret love of destruction, the pleasure of annihilation, our darkest glee. Perhaps when at last they reach us, we shall realize that they

are us and we are them.' *That Dragnipur has but cut us in two, and all chaos seeks is to draw us whole once more.*

*Oh, really now, Draconus, have you lost your mind?*

'If they are the evil in our souls, Pearl, then there can be no doubt as to their desire.'

'Perhaps not just our souls,' mused Pearl, wiping blood from his eyes. 'Perhaps every soul, since the beginning of creation. Perhaps, Draconus, when each of us dies, the evil within us is torn free and rushes into the realm of Chaos. Or the evil is that which survives the longest . . .'

Draconus said nothing. The demon's suggestions horrified him, and he thought – oh, he was thinking, yes – that Pearl had found a terrible truth. Somewhere among those possibilities.

*Somewhere among them . . . I think . . . there is a secret. An important secret.*

*Somewhere . . .*

'I do not want to meet my evil self,' said Pearl.

Draconus glanced across at him. 'Who does?'

Ditch was dreaming, for dreaming was his last road to freedom. He could stride, reaching out to the sides, reshaping everything. He could make the world as he wanted it, as it should be, a place of justice, a place where he could be a god and look upon humanity as it truly was: a mob of unruly, faintly ridiculous children. Watch them grasp things when they think no one's looking. Watch them break things, hurt things, steal. Listen to their expostulations of innocence, their breathless list of excuses, listen to how they repent and repent and repent and then go and do the same damned things all over again. Children.

With all his godly powers, he would teach them about consequences, that most terrible of lessons, the one resisted the longest. He would teach them because he had learned in the only way possible – with scars and broken

bones, with sickness in the soul tasting of fear, with all the irreparable damage resulting from all his own thoughtless decisions.

There could be wonder and joy among children, too. Too easy to see naught but gloom, wasn't it? Wonder and joy. Naïve creations of beauty. He was not blind to such things, and, like any god, he understood that such gifts were pleas for mercy. An invitation to indulge that reprehensible host of flaws. Art and genius, compassion and passion, they were as islands assailed on all sides. But no island lived for ever. The black, writhing, worm-filled seas ever rose higher. And sooner or later, the hungry storms ate their fill.

Nature might well struggle for balance. And perhaps the egregious imbalance Ditch thought he perceived in his kind was but an illusion, and redress waited, stretched out to match the extremity. A fall as sudden and ferocious as the rise.

In his state of dreaming, it did not occur to him that his dreams were not his own, that this harsh cant of judgement belonged to a tyrant or even a god, or to one such as himself if madness had taken hold. But he was not mad, and nor was he a tyrant, and for all his natural inclination (natural to almost everyone) to wish for true justice he was, after all, wise enough to know the vulnerability of moral notions, the ease with which they were corrupted. Was he dreaming, then, the dreams of a god?

Blind as Kadaspala was, he could sense far too much of Ditch's visions – he could feel the incandescent rage in the flicker of the man's eyelids, the heat of his breath, the ripples of tautness washing over his face. Oh, this unconscious wizard stalked an unseen world, filled with outrage and fury, with the hunger for retribution.

There were so many paths to godhood. Kadaspala was certain of that. So many paths, so many paths. Refuse to die, refuse to surrender, refuse to die and refuse to surrender and that was one path, stumbled on to without true intent, without even wanting it, and these gods were the bemused ones, the reluctant ones. They were best left alone, for to prod them awake was to risk apocalypse. Reluctant power was the deadliest power of them all, for

the anger behind it was long stoked. Long stoked and stoked long and long, so best leave them leave them leave them alone.

Other gods were called into being and the nature of that call took countless forms. A convulsion of natural forces, until the very sludge awakens. Wherever discordant elements clashed, the possibility was born. Life. Intent. Desire and need. But these too were accidental things, in as much as anything could be accidental when all the particles necessary for creation abounded, as they surely did. There were other ways of calling a god into being.

Gather a host of words, a host of words. Gather a host of words. Make them, make them, make them what? Physical, yes, make them physical, from the empty ether to the incision in clay, the stain on stone, the ink on skin. Physical, because the physical created – by its very nature before the eye (or the inner eye) – created and created *patterns*. And they could be played with played with played with. In numbers and sigils, in astral proportions. They could be coded inside codes inside codes until something is rendered, something both beautiful and absolute. Beautiful in its absoluteness. In its absolution, in its absolved essence, a thing of beauty.

Understand, won't you, the truth of patterns, how pattern finds truth in the tension of juxtaposition, in the game of meaning meaning the game which is the perfect pattern of language in the guise of imperfection – but what value any of this any of this any of this?

The value is the body of text (hah, the body – the *bodies*) that in its absoluteness becomes sacred, and in sacredness becomes all that it portrays in its convivial ordering of the essentially meaningless. Patterns where none existed before. Creation from nothing. Awakening from absence of self. And what is the word the beautiful word the precious word and the perfect word that starts the game starts everything everything everything?

Why, the word is *birth.*

Bodies of text, all these bodies, all this flesh and the ink and the words and the words oh the words. Bodies and bodies, patterns inside patterns, lives and lives and lives all dreaming . . . all dreaming one dream.

One dream. One dream one dream one one one dream.

One.

A dream of justice.

'Let the cosmos quake,' Kadaspala whispered as he etched sigil inside sigil inside sigil, as he wove language and meaning, as the ink rode the piercing and flowed beneath skin pocket by pocket. 'Quake and quiver, whimper and quaver. A god oh a god yes a god now a god soon a god a god awakens. Lives and lives cut down one and all, cut down, yes, by judgement's sharp edge – did we deserve it? Did we earn the punishment? Are any of us innocent, any of us at all? Not likely not likely not likely. So, lives and lives and none none none of us did not receive precisely what we deserved.

'Do you understand? Godling, to you I speak. Listen listen listen well. We are what you come from. The punished, the punished, the victims of justice, the victims of our own stupidity, yes, and who could say that none of us has learned our lesson? Who can say that? Look oh look oh look where we are! Godling, here is your soul, writ in flesh, in flesh, writ here by Kadaspala, who was once blind though he could see and now can see though he is blind. And am I not the very definition of sentience? Blind in life, I can see in death – the definition of mortality, my darling child, heed it and heed it come the moment you must act and decide and stand and sit in judgement. Heed and heed, godling, this eternal flaw.

'And what, you will wonder, is written upon your soul? What is written here? Here upon the flesh of your soul? Ah, but that is the journey of your life, godling, to learn the language of your soul, to learn it to learn it even as you live it.

'Soon, birth arrives. Soon, life awakens.

'Soon, *I make a god.*'

And even now, the god dreams of justice. For, unlike Ditch, Kadaspala is indeed mad. His code struck to flesh is a code of laws. The laws from which the god shall be born. Consider that, consider that well.

In the context of, say, mercy . . .

She was out there, down in the basin, on her knees, head hanging, her torso weaving back and forth to some inner rhythm. After studying her yet again, Seerdomin, with a faint gasp, tore his gaze away – something it was getting ever harder to manage, for she was mesmerizing, this childwoman, this fount of corruption, and the notion that a woman's fall could be so alluring, so perfectly sexual, left him horrified. By this language of invitation. By his own darkness.

Behind him, the Redeemer murmured, 'Her power grows. Her power over you, Segda Travos.'

'I do not want to be where she is.'

'Don't you?'

Seerdomin turned and eyed the god. 'Self-awareness can be a curse.'

'A necessary one.'

'I suppose so,' he conceded.

'Will you still fight her, Segda Travos?'

'I think so, yes.'

'Why?'

Seerdomin bared his teeth. 'Don't you start with me, Redeemer. The enemy never questions motivations – the enemy doesn't chew the ground out beneath its own feet.' He jabbed a finger back at the woman kneeling in the basin. 'She has no questions. No doubts. What she has instead is strength. Power.'

'That is true,' said the Redeemer. 'All of it. It is why those haunted by uncertainty must ever retreat. They cannot stand before the self-righteous. Instead, they must slink away, they must hide, they must slip behind the enemy's lines—' 'Where every damned one of them is hunted down and silenced – no, Redeemer, you forget, I *lived* in a tyranny. I kicked in doors. I

dragged people away. Do you truly believe unbelievers will be tolerated? Scepticism is a criminal act.

Wave the standard or someone else will, and they'll be coming for you. Redeemer, I have looked in the eyes of my enemy, and they are hard, cold, emptied of everything but hate. I have, yes, seen my own reflection – it haunts me still.'

No further words were exchanged then. Seerdomin looked back down to that woman, the High Priestess who had once been Salind. She was naught but a tool, now, a weapon of some greater force's will, its hunger. The same force, he now suspected, that drove nations to war, that drove husbands to kill wives and wives to kill husbands. That could take even the soul of a god and crush it into subservience.

*When will you rise, Salind? When will you come for me?*

This was not the afterlife he had imagined. *My fighting should be over. My every need made meaningless, the pain of thoughts for ever silenced.*

*Is not death's gift indifference? Blissful, perfect indifference?*

She swayed back and forth, gathering strength as only the surrendered could do.

Monkrat walked through the pilgrim camp. Dishevelled as it had once been, now it looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. Tents had sagged; shacks leaned perilously close to collapse. There was rubbish everywhere. The few children still alive after being so long abandoned watched him walk past with haunted eyes peering out from filth-streaked faces. Sores ate into their drawn lips. Their bellies were swollen under the rags. There was nothing to be done for them, and even if there was, Monkrat was not the man to do it. In his mind he had left humanity behind long ago. There was no kinship to nip at his heart. Every fool the world over was on his or her own, or they were slaves. These were the only two states of being – every other one was a lie. And Monkrat had no desire to become a slave, as much as Gradithan or saemankelyk might want that.

No, he would remain his own world. It was easier that way. Ease was important. Ease was all that mattered.

Soon, he knew, he would have to escape this madness. Gradithan's ambitions had lost all perspective – the curse of kelyk. He talked now incessantly of the coming of the Dying God, the imminent end of all things and the glorious rebirth to follow. People talking like that disgusted Monkrat. They repeated themselves so often it soon became grossly obvious that their words were wishes and the wish was that their words might prove true. Round and round, all that wasted breath. The mind so liked to go round and round, so liked that familiar track, the familiarity of it. Round and round, and each time round the mind was just that much stupider. Increment by increment, the range of thoughts narrower, the path underfoot more deeply trenched – he had even noted how the vocabulary diminished, as uneasy notions were cast away and all the words associated with them, too. The circular track became a mantra, the mantra a proclamation of stupid wishes that things could be as they wanted them, that in fact they *were* as they wanted them.

Fanaticism was so popular. There had to be a reason for that, didn't there? Some vast reward to the end of thinking, some great bliss to the blessing of idiocy. Well, Monkrat trusted none of that. He knew how to think for himself and that was all he knew so why give it up? He'd yet to hear an argument that could convince him – but of course, fanatics didn't use arguments, did they? No, just that fixed gaze, the threat, the reason to fear.

Aye, he'd had enough. Gods below, he was actually longing for the city where he had been born. There in the shadow of Mock's Hold, and that blackwater bay of the harbour where slept a demon, half buried in mud and tumbled ballast stones. And who knew, maybe there was no one left there to recognize him – and why would they in any case? His old name was on the toll of the fallen, after all, and beside it was *Blackdog Wood, 1159 Burn's Sleep.* The Bridgeburners were gone, dead, destroyed in Pale with the remnants mopped up here at Black Coral. But he'd been a casualty long before then, and the years since then had been damned hard – no, it wasn't likely that he'd be recognized.

Yes, Malaz City sounded sweet now, as he walked this wretched camp's main street, the squalling of gulls loud in his ears.

*Gradithan, you've lost it.*

*There won't be any vengeance on the Tiste Andii. Not for me, not for you. It was a stupid idea and now it's gone too far.*

History wasn't worth reliving. He understood that now. But people never learned that – they never fucking learned that, did they? Round and round.

A fallen pilgrim stumbled out from between two hovels, brown-smeared chin and murky eyes swimming in some dubious rapture painting its lie behind them. He wanted to kick the brainless idiot between the legs. He wanted to stomp on the fool's skull and see the shit-coloured sludge spill out. He wanted every child to watch him do it, too, so they'd realize, so they'd run for their lives.

Not that he cared.

'High Priestess.'

She looked up, then rose from behind her desk, came round with a gathering of her robes, and then bowed. 'Son of Darkness, welcome. Did we have anything arranged?'

His smile was wry. 'Do we ever?'

'Please,' she said, 'do come in. I will send for wine and—'

'No need on my account, High Priestess.' Anomander Rake walked into the small office, eyed the two chairs and then selected the least ornate one to sit down in. He stretched out his legs, fingers lacing together on his lap, and eyed her speculatively.

She raised her arms, 'Shall I dance?'

'Shall I sing?'

'Abyss take me, no. Please.'

'Do sit down,' said Rake, indicating the other chair.

She did so, keeping her back straight, a silent question lifting her eyebrows.

He continued watching her.

She let out a breath and slumped back. 'All right, then.

I'm relaxing. See?'

'You have ever been my favourite,' he said, looking away.

'Your favourite what?'

'High Priestess, of course. What else might I be thinking?'

'Well, that is the eternal question, isn't it?'

'One too many people spend too much time worrying about.'

'You cannot be serious, Anomander.'

He seemed to be studying her desk – not the things scattered on its surface, but the desk itself. 'That's too small for you,' he pronounced.

She glanced at it. 'You are deceived, alas. It's my disorganization that's too big. Give me a desk the size of a concourse and I'll still fill it up with junk.'

'Then it must be your mind that is too big, High Priestess.'

'Well,' she said, 'there is so little to think about and so much time.' She fluttered a hand. 'If my thoughts have become oversized it's only out of indolence.' Her gaze sharpened. 'And we have become so indolent, haven't we?'

'She has been turned away for a long time,' Anomander Rake said. 'That I allowed all of you to turn instead to me was ever a dubious enterprise.'

'You made no effort to muster worship, Son of Darkness, and that is what made it dubious.'

One brow lifted. 'Not my obvious flaws?'

'And Mother Dark is without flaws? No, the Tiste Andii were never foolish enough to force upon our icons the impossibility of perfection.'

'"Icons",' said Anomander Rake, frowning as he continued studying the desk.

'Is that the wrong word? I think not.'

'And that is why I rejected the notion of worship.'

'Why?'

'Because, sooner or later, the believers shatter their icons.'

She grunted, and thought about that for a time, before sighing and nodding. 'A hundred fallen, forgotten civilizations, yes. And in the ruins all those statues . . . with their faces chopped off. The loss of faith is ever violent, it seems.'

'Ours was.'

The statement stung her. 'Ah, we are not so different then, after all. What a depressing realization.'

'Endest Silann,' he said.

'Your stare is making the legs of my desk tremble, Lord Rake – am I so unpleasant that you dare not rest eyes upon me?'

He slowly turned his head and settled his gaze upon her.

And seeing all that was in his eyes almost made her flinch, and she understood, all at once, the mercy he had been giving her – with his face turned away, with his eyes veiled by distraction. But then she had asked for his regard, as much out of vanity as the secret pleasure of her attraction to him – she could not now break this connection. Marshalling her resolve, she said, 'Endest Silann, yes. The reason for this visit. I understand.'

'He is convinced he was broken long ago, High Priestess. We both know it is not true.'

She nodded. 'He proved that when he sustained Moon's Spawn beneath the sea – proved it to everyone but himself.'

'I reveal to him my confidence,' said Rake, 'and each time he . . . contracts. I cannot reach through, it seems, to bolster what I know is within him.'

'Then it is his faith that is broken.'

He grimaced, made no reply.

'When the time comes,' she said, 'I will be there. To do what I can. Although,' she added, 'that may not be much.'

'You need not elaborate on the efficacy of your presence, High Priestess. We are speaking, as you said, of faith.'

'And there need be no substance to it. Thank you.'

He glanced away once more, and this time the wry smile she had seen before played again across his features. 'You were always my favourite,' he said.

'Me, or the desk you so seem to love?'

He rose and she did the same. 'High Priestess,' he said.

'Son of Darkness,' she returned, with another bow.

And out he went, leaving in his wake a sudden absence, an almost audible clap of displacement – but no, that was in her mind, a hint of something hovering there behind her memory of his face, his eyes and all that she had seen there.

*Mother Dark, hear me. Heed me. You did not understand your son then. You do not understand him now.*

*Don't you see? This was all Draconus's doing.*

'This ain't right,' gasped Reccanto Ilk, each word spraying blood. 'When it comes to screaming women, they should be leaving the bar, not trying to get in!'

The ragged hole the shrieking, snarling, jaw-snapping women had torn through the tavern's door was jammed with arms stretching, fingers

clutching, all reaching inward in a desperate attempt to tear through the barrier. Claws stabbed into the Trell's tattooed shoulders and he ducked his head lower, grunting as the demons battered at the door, planks splintering – but that Trell was one strong bastard, and he was holding 'em back, as he had been doing since that first rush that nearly saw Reccanto's precious head get torn off.

Thank whatever gods squatted in the muck of this damned village that these demons were so stupid. Not one had tried either of the shuttered windows flanking the entrance, although with that barbed hulk, Gruntle, waiting at one of 'em with his cutlasses at the ready, and Faint and the Bole brothers at the other, at least if them demons went and tried one of 'em they'd be cut to pieces in no time. Or so Reccanto hoped, since he was hiding under a table and a table wasn't much cover, or wouldn't be if them demons was nasty enough to tear apart Gruntle and Faint and the Boles and the Trell, and Sweetest Sufferance, too, for that matter.

Master Quell and that swampy witch, Precious Thimble, were huddled together at the back, at the barred cellar door, doing Hood knew what. Glanno Tarp was missing – he'd gone with the horses when they went straight and the carriage went left, and Reccanto was pretty sure that the idiot had gone and killed himself bad. Or worse.

As for that corpse, Cartographer, why, the last Ilk had seen of it it was still lashed to a wheel, spinning in a blur as the damned thing spun off its axle and bounded off into the rainy night. Why couldn't the demons go after it? A damned easier fight—

Repeated blows were turning the door into a shattered wreck, and one of the arms angled down to slash deep gouges across Mappo's back, making the Trell groan and groaning wasn't good, since it meant Mappo might just give up trying to hold 'em back and in they'd come, straight for the man hiding under the table. It wasn't fair. Nothing was fair and what was fair about that, dammit?

He drew out his rapier and clutched the grip in one shaky hand. A lunge from the knees – was such a thing possible? He was about to find out. Oh, yes, he'd skewer one for its troubles, just watch. And if the other two (he

was pretty sure there were three of 'em) ripped him up then fine, just fine. A man could only do so much.

Gruntle was shouting something at Mappo, and the Trell bellowed a reply, drawing his legs up under himself as if about to dive to one side – thanks a whole lot, you ogre! – and then all at once Mappo did just that, off to the right, slamming into the legs of the Boles and Faint and taking all three down with him.

An explosion of wood splinters and thrashing arms, clacking fangs, unclean hair and terribly unreasonable expressions, and the three screeching women plunged in.

Two were brought up short pretty fast, as their heads leapt up in gouts of greenish uck and their bodies sprawled in a thrashing mess.

Even as this was happening, the third woman charged straight for Reccanto. He shrieked and executed his lunge from the knees, which naturally wasn't a lunge at all. More like a flèche, a forward flinging of his upper body, arm and point extended, and as he overbalanced and landed with a bone-creaking thump on the floorboards the rapier's point snagged on something and the blade bowed alarmingly and so he let go, so that it sprang up, then back down, the pommel crunching the top of Reccanto's head, not once, but twice, each time driving his face into the floor, nose crackling in a swirl of stinging tears and bursting into his brain the horrid stench of mouse droppings and greasy dirt – immediately replaced by a whole lot of flowing blood.

It was strangely quiet, and, moaning, Reccanto rolled on to his side and lifted himself up on one elbow.

And found himself staring into the blank, horrible eyes of the woman who'd charged him. The rapier point had driven in between her eyes, straight in, so far that he should be able to see it coming back out from somewhere beneath the back of her skull – but it wasn't there. Meaning—

'She broke it!' he raged, clambering on to his feet. 'She broke my damned rapier!'

The demonic woman was on her knees, head thrust forward, mouth still stretched open, the weight of her upper body resting on the knocked-over chair that had served as pathetic barricade. The other two, headless, still thrashed on the floor as green goo flowed. Gruntle was studying that ichor where it slathered the broad blades of his cutlasses.

Mappo, the Boles and Faint were slowly regaining their feet.

Sweetest Sufferance, clutching a clay bottle, staggered up to lean against Reccanto. 'Too bad about your rapier,' she said, 'but damn me, Ilk, that was the neatest flèche I ever did see.'

Reccanto squinted, wiped blood from his streaming nose and lacerated lips, and then grinned. 'It was, wasn't it. The timing of a master—'

'I mean, how could you have guessed she'd trip on one of them rolling heads and go down on her knees skidding like that, straight into your thrust?'

Tripped? Skidded? 'Yes, well, like I said, I'm a master duellist.'

'I could kiss you,' she continued, her breath rank with sour wine, 'except you went and pissed yourself and there's limits t'decency, if you know what I mean.'

'That ain't piss – we're all still sopping wet!'

'But we don't quite smell the way you do, Ilk.'

Snarling, he lurched away. Damned overly sensitive woman! 'My rapier,' he moaned.

'Shattered inside her skull, I'd wager,' said Gruntle, 'which couldn't have done her brain any good. Nicely done, Reccanto.'

Ilk decided it was time to strut a little.

Whilst Reccanto Ilk walked round like a rooster, Precious Thimble glanced over worriedly at the Boles, and was relieved to see them both apparently unharmed. They hadn't been paying her enough attention lately and they weren't paying her any now either. She felt a tremor of unease.

Master Quell was thumping on the cellar door. 'I know you can hear me,' he called. 'You, hiding in there. We got three of 'em – is there more? Three of 'em killed. Is there more?'

Faint was checking her weapons. 'We got to go and find Glanno,' she said. 'Any volunteers?'

Gruntle walked over, pausing to peer out of the doorway. 'The rain's letting off – looks as if the storm's spent. I'll go with you, Faint.'

'I was asking for volunteers – I wasn't volunteering myself.'

'I'll go!' said Amby.

'I'll go!' said Jula.

And then they glared at each other, and then grinned as if at some private joke, and a moment later both burst out laughing.

'What's so funny?' Precious Thimble demanded, truly bewildered this time. *Have they lost their minds? Assuming they have minds, I mean.*

Her harsh query sobered them and both ducked, avoiding her stare.

The cellar door creaked open, drawing everyone's attention, and a bewhiskered face poked out, eyes wide and rolling. 'Three, ya said? Ya said three?'

The dialect was Genabackan, the accent south islander.

'Ya got ah three? Deed?'

Quell nodded. 'Any more lurking about, host?'

A quick shake of the head, and the tavern keep edged out, flinching when he saw the slaughtered bodies. 'Oh, darlings,' he whispered, 'ahm so soory. So soory!'

'You know them?' Quell asked. 'You know what they were?'

More figures crowded behind the keep, pale faces, frightened eyes. To Quell's questions the whiskered man flinched. 'Coarsed,' he said in a rasp. 'Our daughters . . . coarsed.'

'Cursed? When they come of age, right?'

A jerky nod, and then the man's eyes widened on the wizard. 'You know it? You know the coarse?'

'How long have you had it, host? Here, in this village – how long have you had the curse?'

'Foor yars now. Foor yars.' And the man edged out. 'Aai, their heeds! Ya cart erf their heeds!' Behind him the others set up a wailing.

Precious Thimble met Quell's eyes and they exchanged a nod. 'Still about, I'd say,' Precious said under her breath.

'Agreed. Should we go hunting?'

She looked round once more. Mappo was dragging the first naked, headless corpse out through the doorway. The green blood had blackened on the floor and left tarry streaks trailing the body. 'Let's take that Trell with us, I think.'

'Good idea.' Quell walked up to the tavern keep. 'Is there a constable in this village? Who rules the land – where in Hood's name are we anyway?'

Owlish blinks of the eyes. 'Reach of Woe is war ye are. Seen the toower? It's war the Provost leeves. Yull wan the Provost, ah expeect.'

Quell turned away, rubbed at his eyes, then edged close to Precious Thimble. 'We're agreed, then, it's witchery, this curse.'

'Witch or warlock,' she said, nodding.

'We're on the Reach of Woe, a wrecker coast. I'd wager it's the arrival of strangers that wakes up the daughters – they won't eat their kin, will they?'

'When the frenzy's on them,' said Precious Thimble, 'they'll eat anything that moves.'

'That's why the locals bolted, then, right. Fine, Witch, go collect Mappo – and this time, tell him he needs to arm himself. This could get messy.'

Precious Thimble looked over at the last body the Trell was now dragging outside. 'Right,' she said.

Flanked by the Boles, Jula on his right, Amby on his left, Gruntle walked back down to the main street, boots squelching in the mud. The last spits of rain cooled his brow. Oh, he'd wanted a nastier fight. The problem with mindless attackers was their mindlessness, which made them pathetically predictable. And only three of the damned things—

'I was going first,' said Amby.

'No, I was,' said Jula.

Gruntle scowled. 'Going where? What are you two talking about?'

'That window back there,' said Jula, 'at the tavern. If'n the girlies got in through the door, I was goin' out through the window – only we couldn't get the shutters pulled back—'

'That was your fault,' said Amby. 'I kept lifting the latch and you kept pushing it back down.'

'The latch goes down to let go, Amby, you idiot.'

'No it goes up – it went up, I saw it—'

'And then back down—'

'Up.'

'Then down.'

Gruntle's sudden growl silenced them both. They were now following the hoof prints and various furrows of things being dragged in the wake of the animals. In the squat houses to either side, muted lights flickered through thick-glassed windows. The sound of draining water surrounded them, along with the occasional distant rumble of thunder. The air mocked with the freshness that came after a storm.

'There they are,' said Amby, pointing. 'Just past that low wall. You see them, Gruntle? You see them?'

A corral. The wreckage of the carriage high bench was scattered along the base of the stone wall.

Reaching it, they paused, squinted at the field of churned-up mud, the horses huddled at the far end – eyeing them suspiciously – and there, something sprawled near the middle. A body. Far off to the left was one of the carriage wheels.

Gruntle leading the way, they climbed the wall and set out for Glanno Tarp.

As they drew closer, they could hear him talking.

'. . . and so she wasn't so bad, compared to Nivvy, but it was years before I surrealized not all women talked that way, and if I'd a known, well, I probably would never have agreed to it. I mean, I have some decency in me, I'm sure of it. It was the way she carried on pretending she was nine years old, eyes so wide, all those cute things she did which, when you think about it, was maybe cute some time, long ago, but now – I mean, her hair was going grey, for Hood's sake – oh, you found me. Good. No, don't move me just yet, my legs is broke and maybe a shoulder too, and an arm, wrist, oh, and this finger here, it's sprained. Get Quell – don't go moving me without Quell, all right? Thanks. Now, where was I? Nivvy? No, that stall keeper, Luft, now she didn't last, for the reasons I experplained before. It was months before I found me a new woman – well, before Coutre found me, would be more reaccurate. She'd just lost all her hair . . .'

The carriage wheel had moved slightly. Gruntle had caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and, leaving Glanno babbling on to the Boles, who stood looking down with mouths hanging open, he set out for it.

He sheathed his cutlasses and heaved at the wheel. It resisted until, with a thick slurping sound, it lifted clear of the mud and Gruntle pushed it entirely upright.

Cartographer was a figure seemingly composed entirely of clay, still bound by the wrists and ankle to the spokes. The face worked for a time, pushing out lumps of mud from its mouth, and then the corpse said, 'It's the jam-smeared bread thing, isn't it?'

'Look at that,' Quell said.

Precious Thimble made a warding gesture and then spat thrice, up, down, straight ahead. 'Blackdog Swamp,' she said. 'Mott Wood. This was why I left, dammit! That's the problem with Jaghut, they show up everywhere.'

Behind them, Mappo grunted but otherwise offered no comment.

The tower was something between square and round, the corners either weathered down by centuries and centuries of wind or deliberately softened to ease that same buffeting, howling wind. The entranceway was a narrow gloomy recess beneath a mossy lintel stone, the moss hanging in beards that dripped in a curtain of rainwater, each drop popping into eroded hollows on the slab of the landing.

'So,' said Quell with brittle confidence, 'the village Provost went and moved into a Jaghut tower. That was brave—'

'Stupid.'

'Stupidly brave, yes.'

'Unless,' she said, sniffing the air. 'That's the other problem with Jaghut. When they build towers, they live in them. For ever.'

Quell groaned. 'I was pretending not to think that, Witch.'

'As if that would help.'

'It helped me!'

'There's two things we can do,' Precious Thimble announced. 'We can turn right round and ignore the curse and all that and get out of this town as fast as possible.'

'Or?'

'We can go up to that door and knock.'

Quell rubbed at his chin, glanced back at a silent Mappo, and then once more eyed the tower. 'This witchery – this curse here, Precious, that strikes when a woman comes of age.'

'What about it? It's a damned old one, a nasty one.'

'Can you break it?'

'Not likely. All we can hope to do is make the witch or warlock change her or his mind about it. The caster can surrender it a whole lot more easily than someone else can break it.'

'And if we kill the caster?'

She shrugged. 'Could go either way, Wizard. Poof! Gone. Or . . . not. Anyway, you're stepping sideways, Quell. We were talking about this . . . this Provost.'

'Not sideways, Witch. I was thinking, well, about you and Sweetest Sufferance and Faint, that's all.'

All at once she felt as if she'd just swallowed a fistful of icy knuckles. Her throat ached, her stomach curdled. 'Oh, shit.'

'And since,' Quell went on remorselessly, 'it's going to be a day or two before we can effect repairs – at best – well . . .'

'I think we'd better knock,' she said.

'All right. Just let me, er, empty my bladder first.'

He walked off to the stone-lined gutter to his left. Mappo went off a few paces in the other direction, to rummage in his sack.

Precious Thimble squinted up at the tower. 'Well,' she whispered, 'if you're a Jaghut – and I think you are – you know we're standing right here. And you can smell the magic on our breaths. Now, we're not looking for trouble, but there's no chance you don't know nothing about that curse – we need to find that witch or warlock, you see, that nasty villager who made up this nasty curse, because we're stuck here for a few days. Understand? There's three women stuck here. And I'm one of them.'

'You say something?' Quell asked, returning.

'Let's go,' she said as Mappo arrived, holding an enormous mace.

They walked to the door.

Halfway there, it swung open.

'My mate,' said the Provost, 'is buried in the yard below.' He was standing at the window, looking out over the tumultuous seas warring with the shoals.

Quell grunted. 'What yard?' He leaned forward and peered down. 'What yard?'

The Provost sighed. 'It was there two days ago.' He turned from the window and eyed the wizard.

Who did his best not to quail.

Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape, who called himself a Jaghut Anap, was simply gigantic, possibly weighing more than Mappo and at least a head and a half taller than the Trell. His skin was blue, a deeper hue than any Malazan Napan Quell could recall seeing. The blue even seemed to stain the silver-tipped tusks jutting from his lower jaw.

Quell cleared his throat. He needed to pee again, but that would have to wait. 'You lost her long ago?'

'Who?'

'Er, your mate?'

Bedusk Agape selected one of the three crystal decanters on the marble table, sniffed at its contents, and then refilled their goblets. 'Have you ever had a wife, Wizard?'

'No, not that I'm aware of.'

'Yes, it can be like that at times.'

'It can?'

The Jaghut gestured towards the window. 'One moment there, the next . . . gone.'

'Oh, the cliff.'

'No, no. I was speaking of my wife.'

Quell shot Precious Thimble a helpless look. Off near the spiral staircase, Mappo stood examining an elaborate eyepiece of some kind, mounted on a spike with a peculiar ball-hinge that permitted the long black metal instrument to be swivelled about, side to side and up and down. The damned Trell was paying attention to all the wrong things.

Precious Thimble looked back at Quell with wide eyes.

'Loss,' stammered the wizard, 'is a grievous thing.'

'Well of course it is,' said Bedusk Agape, frowning.

'Um, not always. If, for example, one loses one's, er, virginity, or a favourite shiny stone, say . . .'

The red-rimmed eyes stayed steady, unblinking.

Quell wanted to squeeze his legs together – no, better, fold one over the other – lest his snake start drooling or, worse, spitting.

Precious Thimble spoke in a strangely squeaky voice, 'Jaghut Anap, the curse afflicting this village's daughters—'

'There have been twelve in all,' said Bedusk Agape.

'Thus far.'

'Oh. What happened to the other nine?'

The Jaghut flicked his gaze over to her. 'You are not the first trouble to arrive in the past few years. Of course,' he added, after sipping his wine, 'all the young girls are now sent to the next village along this coast – permanently, alas, which does not bode well for the future of this town.'

'I thought I saw women down in the tavern cellar,' said Precious Thimble.

'Bearing a child prevents the settling of the curse. Mothers are immune. Therefore, if you or your fellow female companions have at any time produced a child, you need not worry.'

'Um,' said Precious Thimble, 'I don't think any of us qualify.'

'How unfortunate,' said Bedusk.

'So how is it you got elected Provost?' Quell asked. 'Just curious, you see – I'm the nosy type, that's all. I didn't mean anything—'

'I believe it was a collective attempt to ameliorate my grief, my solitude. None would deny, I now expect, that such an invitation was ill-conceived.'

'Oh? Why?'

'Well, had I remained in my isolation, this terrible curse would not exist, I am afraid.'

'It's your curse, then?'

'Yes.'

A long moment of silence. From near the staircase, Mappo slowly turned to face them.

'Then you can end it,' said Quell.

'I could, yes, but I shall not.'

'Why?'

'Because you are not that important.'

Quell crossed his legs. 'May I ask, what happened to your mate?'

'We argued. I lost. I buried her.'

There seemed to be, at least to the wizard's thinking, something missing in that answer. But he was getting distracted by his bladder. He couldn't think straight.

'So,' said Precious Thimble in a thin voice, 'if you lose an argument to someone, you then kill them?'

'Oh, I didn't say she was dead.'

Mappo spoke from where he still stood, 'She is now, Jaghut.'

Bedusk Agape sighed. 'That does seem likely, doesn't it?'

'How long,' the Trell asked, 'was she pinned down? Your mate?'

'Nine years or so.'

'And the argument?'

'I sense a certain belligerence in you, Trell.'

'Belligerence, Jaghut?' Mappo bared his fangs in a cold grin. 'Your senses have dulled with disuse, I think.'

'I see. And you imagine you can best me?'

'I was asking you about the argument.'

'Something trivial. I have forgotten the details.'

'But you found yourself alone, at least until the villagers took pity on you and elected you their Provost. And then . . . you fell in love?'

Bedusk Agape winced.

Precious Thimble gasped. 'Oh! I see now. Oh, it's like that. She spurned you. You got mad, again, only this time you couldn't very well bury the whole village—'

'Actually, I considered it.'

'Um, well, you decided not to, then. So, instead, you worked up a curse, on her and all her young pretty friends, since they laughed at you or whatever. You turned them all into Tralka Vonan. Blood Feeders.'

'You cannot hope to break my curse, Witch,' said Bedusk. 'Even with the wizard's help, you will fail.' The Jaghut then faced Mappo. 'And you, Trell, even if you manage to kill me, the curse will not die.' He refilled his goblet for the third time. 'Your women will have a day or so before the curse takes effect. In that time, I suppose, they could all endeavour to become pregnant.'

All at once Quell sat straighter.

But when he saw Precious Thimble's expression, his delighted smile turned somewhat sheepish.

Down on the narrow strand of what had once been beach, at the foot of the raw cliff, waves skirled foam-thick tendrils through the chunks of clay and rock and black hairy roots, gnawing deep channels and sucking back into the sea milky, silt-laden water. The entire heap was in motion, settling, dissolving, sections collapsing under the assault of the waves.

Farther down the beach the strand re-emerged, the white sand seemingly studded with knuckles of rust, to mark the thousands of ship nails and rivets that had been scattered in profusion along the shoreline. Fragments of wood formed a snagged barrier higher up, and beyond that, cut into the cliff-face, weathered steps led up to a hacked-out cave mouth.

This cave was in fact a tunnel, rising at a steep angle up through the bowels of the promontory, to open out in the floor of the village's largest structure, a stone and timbered warehouse where the wreckers off-loaded their loot after the long haul of the carts from the cliff base. A tidy enterprise, all things considered, one that gave employment to all the folk of the village – from tending the false fires to rowing the deep-hulled boats out to the reef, where the stripping down of the wrecks took place, along with clubbing survivors and making sure they drowned. The local legend, concocted to provide meagre justification for such cruel endeavours, revolved around some long-ago pirate raids on the village, and how someone (possibly the Provost, who had always lived here, or the locally famous Gacharge Hadlorn Who Waits – but he had left so there was no way to ask him) had suggested that, since the sea was so eager to deliver murderers to this shore, why could it not also deliver death to the would-be murderers? And so, once the notion was planted, the earth was tilled, with mallet and pick and flint and fire, and the days of fishing for a living off the treacherous shoals soon gave way to a far more lucrative venture.

Oh, the nets were cast out every now and then, especially in the calm season when the pickings got slim, and who could deny the blessing of so many fish these days, and fat, big ones at that? Why, it wasn't so long ago that they'd damned near fished out the area.

The beach was comfortable with half-eaten corpses rolling up on to the sands, where crabs and gulls swarmed. The beach helped pick the bones

clean and then left them to the waves to bury or sweep away. On this fast-closing night, however, something unusual clawed its way to the shore. Unusual in that it still lived. Crabs scuttled from its path as fast as their tiny legs could manage.

Water sluiced from the figure as it heaved itself upright. Red-rimmed eyes scanned the scene, fixing at last on the steps and the gaping mouth of the cave. After a moment, it set out in that direction, leaving deep footprints that the beach hastened to smooth away.

'Do you really think I can't see what's going on in your skull, Quell? You're right there, first in line, with the three of us lying in a row, legs spread wide. And in you dive, worse than a damned dog on a tilted fence post. Reccanto waiting for his turn, and Glanno, and Jula and Amby and Mappo here and Gruntle and probably that damned undead—'

'Hold on a moment,' growled the Trell.

'Don't even try,' Precious Thimble snapped.

They were marching back to the tavern, Precious Thimble in the lead, the other two hastening to keep up. That she was tiny and needed two steps for every one of theirs seemed irrelevant.

'Then again,' she went on, 'maybe that Jaghut will go and jump the queue, and by the dawn we'll all be planted with some ghastly monster, half Trell, half Jaghut, half pissy wizard, half—'

'Twins?' asked Quell.

She swung a vicious glare back at him. 'Oh, funny.'

'Anyway,' added Quell, 'I'm pretty sure that's not how things like that work—'

'How would you know? No, me and Sweetest and Faint, we're out of here as soon as we can get our gear together – you can collect us somewhere down the road. This damned village can go to Hood, with Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape in the lead. They're damned wreckers anyway, and if anybody deserves cursing to damnation, it's them.'

'I wouldn't disagree there,' said Mappo.

'Stop trying to get under my skirt, Trell.'

'What? I wasn't—'

Quell cut in with a snort. 'You don't wear skirts, Witch. Though if you did, it'd be so much easier—'

Now she spun round. 'What would be, Quell?'

He'd halted and now backed up. 'Sorry, did I think that out loud?'

'You think the curse on this village is bad, you just wait and see what I can come up with!'

'All right, we take your point, Precious. Relax. You three just go, right? We'll get the carriage fixed up and find you, just like you said.'

She whirled about once more and resumed her march.

Gruntle saw the three in the street, closing fast on the entrance to the tavern. He shouted to catch their attention and hurried over.

'Master Quell, your driver is a heap of broken bones back there, but he's still breathing.'

'Well, he should have let go of the damned reins,' Quell said in a growl. 'And now I got to do healing and that takes time. That's just great – how am I supposed to fix the carriage? Why can't anybody else do anything useful round here? You, Witch – go and heal Glanno—'

'I can't do that! Oh, I can set splints and spit on wounds to chase infection away, but it's sounding as if he needs a whole lot more than that. Right, Gruntle?'

The tattooed warrior shrugged. 'Probably.'

'Don't even try,' she snarled at him, and then stalked into the tavern.

Gruntle stared after her. 'What did she mean? Try what?'

'Getting under her skirt,' said Quell.

'But she doesn't wear—'

'That's not the point,' the wizard cut in. 'You're thinking like a man. That's your mistake. It's all our mistakes, in fact. It's why we're standing out here, three men, no women. If we'd gone and said, why, Precious, we wouldn't even think of it, you know what she'd say then? "What's wrong with me? Am I too ugly or something?" and we'd be in trouble all over again!'

Gruntle glanced bemusedly at Mappo, who, rather cryptically, simply nodded.

Quell straightened his still-wet clothes. 'Lead me to him, then, Gruntle.'

At one end of the corral there was a stable and next to it, a loading platform built of weathered planks that marked one end of a huge, solidly built warehouse. Jula and Amby had helped Glanno sit up, and Cartographer, cut loose from the wheel, was staggering in circles as he plucked and scraped manure off his face, neck, and rotted clothes.

Glanno had reached the eleventh love of his life, some woman named Herboo Nast, '. . . who wore a fox round her neck – not just its fur, you understand, the actual animal, paws trussed up in berbraided silk, gamuzzled in leather, but it was the beast's eyes I remember most – that look. Panic, like it'd just realized it was trapped in its worst nightlymare. Not that she wasn't good-looking, in that goat-like way of hers – you know, those long curly hairs that show up under their chin after a certain age – did I mention how I liked my women experientialled? I do. I most certainly do. I wanna see decades and decades of miserable livin' in their eyes, so that when I arrive, why, it's like a fresh spring rain on a withered daisy. Which one was I talking about? Fox, goat, panic, trussed up, right, Herboo Nast—'

He stopped then, so abruptly that neither Jula nor Amby noticed the sudden, ominous silence, and just kept on with the smiles and nods with which they had accompanied Glanno's monologue, and they were still smiling and nodding when the figure that had appeared on the warehouse loading platform – the one whose arrival had so thoroughly stunned Glanno Tarp's flapping tongue – walked up to halt directly in front of all three, as

the horses bolted for the most distant corner of the corral in a drum-roll of hoofs.

*

'No losses so far and that's good,' said Quell as he and Gruntle walked towards the corral.

'I didn't know you were a practitioner of Denul,' Gruntle said.

'I'm not, not really, I mean. I have elixirs, unguents, salves, and some of those are High Denul, for emergencies.'

'Like now.'

'Maybe. We'll see.'

'Broken legs—'

'Doesn't need legs to drive the carriage, does he? Besides, he might decline my services.'

'Why would he do that?'

'Healing expenses cut into his share. He could come out of this owing the Guild rather than the other way round.' He shrugged. 'Some people refuse.'

'Well,' said Gruntle, 'he said to get you, so I don't think he's going to refuse, Master Quell.'

They reached the low stone wall and then halted.

'Who in Hood's name is that?' Gruntle asked, squinting at the tall ragged figure standing with the Bole brothers.

Quell grunted, and then said, 'Well, and it's just a guess, mind you, but I'd say that that's the Provost's wife.'

'He's married to a Jaghut?'

'Was, until he buried her, but then the yard collapsed into the sea, taking her with it. And now she's back and I'd wager a trip's profit she's not in the

best of moods.' And then he smiled up at Gruntle. 'We can work all this out. Oh, yes, we can work all this out, now.'

This confidence was shattered when Jula and Amby Bole suddenly took it upon themselves to attack the Jaghut. Bellowing, they flung themselves at her, and all three figures lurched about as they struggled, clawed, scratched and bit, until finally they lost their footing and toppled in a multi-limbed mass that slopped heavily in the muck.

Quell and Gruntle scrambled over the wall and raced for them.

Glanno Tarp was shrieking something, his words unintelligible as he sought to crawl away from the scrap.

From the Jaghut woman sorcery erupted, a thundering, deafening detonation that lit up the entire corral and all the buildings nearby. Blinking against the sudden blindness, Gruntle staggered in the mud. He heard Quell fall beside him. The coruscating, actinic light continued to bristle, throwing everything into harsh shadows.

Glanno Tarp resumed his shrieks.

As vision returned, Gruntle saw, to his astonishment, that both Boles still lived. In fact, they had each pinned down an arm and were holding tight as the Jaghut woman thrashed and snarled.

Drawing his cutlasses, Gruntle made his way over. 'Jula! Amby! *What are you doing?'*

Two mud-smeared faces looked up, and their expressions were dark, twisted with anger.

'A swamp witch!' Jula said. 'She's one of them swamp witches!'

'We don't like swamp witches!' added Amby. 'We *kill* swamp witches!'

'Master Quell said this one can help us,' said Gruntle. 'Or she would have, if not for you two jumping her like that!'

'Cut her head off!' said Jula. 'That usually works!'

'I'm not cutting her head off. Let her go, you two—'

'She'll attack us!'

Gruntle crouched down. 'Jaghut – stop snarling – listen to me! If they let you go, will you stop fighting?'

Eyes burned as if aflame. She struggled some more, and then ceased all motion. The blazing glare dimmed, and after a few deep, rattling breaths, she nodded. 'Very well. Now get these two fools off me!'

'Jula, Amby – let go of her—'

'We will, once you cut her head off!'

'Do it now, Boles, or I will cut *your* heads off.'

'Do Amby first!'

'No, Jula first!'

'I've got two cutlasses here, boys, so I'll do it at the same time. How does that suit you?'

The Boles half lifted themselves up and glared across at each other.

'We don't like it,' said Amby.

'So leave off her, then.'

They rolled to the sides, away from the Jaghut woman, and she pulled her arms loose and clambered to her feet. The penumbra of sorcery dimmed, winked out. Breathing hard, she spun to face the Bole brothers, who'd rolled in converging arcs until they collided and were now crouched side by side in the mud, eyeing her like a pair of wolves.

Clutching his head, Master Quell stumbled up to them. 'You idiots,' he gasped. 'Jaghut, your husband's cursed this village. Tralka Vonan. Can you do anything about that?'

She was trying to wipe the mud from her rotted clothes. 'You're not from around here,' she said. 'Who are you people?'

'Just passing through,' Quell said. 'But our carriage needs repairs – and we got wounded—'

'I am about to destroy this village and everyone in it – does that bother you?'

Quell licked his muddy lips, made a face, and then said, 'That depends if you're including us in your plans of slaughter.'

'Are you pirates?'

'No.'

'Wreckers?'

'No.'

'Necromancers?'

'No.'

'Then,' she said, with another glare at the Boles, 'I suppose you can live.'

'Your husband says even if he dies, the curse will persist.'

She bared stained tusks. 'He's lying.'

Quell glanced at Gruntle, who shrugged in return and said, 'I'm not happy with the idea of pointless slaughter, but then, wreckers are the scum of humanity.'

The Jaghut woman walked towards the stone wall. They watched her.

'Master Quell,' said Glanno Tarp, 'got any splints?'

Quell shot Gruntle another look. 'Told you, the cheap bastard.'

At last the sun rose, lifting a rim of fire above the horizon on this the last day of the wrecker village on the Reach of Woe.

From a window of the tower, Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape stood watching his wife approaching up the street. 'Oh,' he murmured, 'I'm in trouble now.'

In the moments before dawn, Kedeviss rose from her blankets and walked out into the darkness. She could make out the shape of him, sitting on a large boulder and staring northward. Rings spun on chains, glittering like snared stars.

Her moccasins on the gravel scree gave her away and she saw him twist round to watch her approach.

'You no longer sleep,' she said.

To this observation, Clip said nothing.

'Something has happened to you,' she continued. 'When you awoke in Bastion, you were . . . changed. I thought it was some sort of residue from the possession. Now, I am not so sure.'

He put away the chain and rings and then slid down from the boulder, landing lightly and taking a moment to straighten his cloak. 'Of them all,' he said in a low voice, 'you, Kedeviss, are the sharpest. You see what the others do not.'

'I make a point of paying attention. You've hidden yourself well, Clip – or whoever you now are.'

'Not well enough, it seems.'

'What do you plan to do?' she asked him. 'Anomander Rake will see clearly, the moment he sets his eyes upon you.

And no doubt there will be others.'

'I was Herald of Dark,' he said.

'I doubt it,' she said.

'I was Mortal Sword to the Black-Winged Lord, to Rake himself.'

'He didn't choose you, though, did he? You worshipped a god who never answered, not a single prayer. A god who, in all likelihood, never even knew you existed.'

'And for that,' whispered Clip, 'he will answer.'

Her brows rose. 'Is this a quest for vengeance? If we had known—'

'What you knew or didn't know is irrelevant.'

'A Mortal Sword serves.'

'I said, Kedeviss, I *was* a Mortal Sword.'

'No longer, then. Very well, Clip, what are you now?'

In the grainy half-light she saw him smile, and something dark veiled his eyes. 'One day, in the sky over Bastion, a warren opened. A machine tumbled out, and down—'

She nodded. 'Yes, we saw that machine.'

'The one within brought with him a child god – oh, not deliberately. No, the mechanism of his sky carriage, in creating gates, in travelling from realm to realm, by its very nature cast a net, a net that captured this child god. And dragged it here.'

'And this traveller – what happened to him?'

Clip shrugged.

She studied him, head cocked to one side. 'We failed, didn't we?'

He eyed her, as if faintly amused.

'We thought we'd driven the Dying God from you – instead, we drove him deeper. By destroying the cavern realm where he dwelt.'

'You ended his pain, Kedeviss,' said Clip. 'Leaving only his . . . hunger.'

'Rake will destroy you. Nor,' she added, 'will we accompany you to Black Coral. Go your own way, godling. We shall find our own way there—'

He was smiling. 'Before me? Shall we race, Kedeviss – me with my hunger and you with your warning? Rake does not frighten me – the Tiste Andii do not frighten me. When they see me, they will see naught but kin – until it is too late.'

'Godling, if in poring through Clip's mind you now feel you understand the Tiste Andii, I must tell you, you are wrong. Clip was a barbarian. Ignorant. A fool. He knew nothing.'

'I am not interested in the Tiste Andii – oh, I will kill Rake, because that is what he deserves. I will feed upon him and take his power into me. No, the

one I seek is not in Black Coral, but within a barrow outside the city. Another young god – so young, so helpless, so naïve.' His smile returned. 'And he knows I am coming for him.'

'Must we then stop you ourselves?'

'You? Nimander, Nenanda, all you *pups*? Now really, Kedeviss.'

'If you—'

His attack was a blur – one hand closing about her throat, the other covering her mouth. She felt her throat being crushed and scrabbled for the knife at her belt.

He spun her round and flung her down to the ground, so hard that the back of her head crunched on the rocks. Dazed, her struggles weakened, flailed, fell away.

Something was pouring out from his hand where it covered her mouth, something that numbed her lips, her jaws, then forced its way into her mouth and down her throat. Thick as tree sap. She stared up at him, saw the muddy gleam of the Dying God's eyes – dying no longer, now freed – and thought: *what have we done?*

He was whispering. 'I could stop now, and you'd be mine. It's tempting.'

Instead, whatever oozed from his hand seemed to burgeon, sliding like a fat, sleek serpent down her throat, coiling in her gut.

'But you might break loose – just a moment's worth, but enough to warn the others, and I can't have that.'

Where the poison touched, there was a moment of ecstatic need, sweeping through her, but that was followed almost instantly by numbness, and then something . . . darker. She could smell her own rot, pooling like vapours in her brain.

*He is killing me.* Even that knowledge could not awaken any strength within her.

'I need the rest of them, you see,' he was saying. 'So we can walk in, right in, without anyone suspecting anything. I need my way in, that's all. Look at Nimander.' He snorted. 'There is no guile in him, none at all. He will be my shield. *My shield.'*

He was no longer gripping her neck. It was no longer necessary.

Kedeviss stared up at him as she died, and her final, fading thought was: *Nimander . . . guileless? Oh, but you don't . . .* And then there was nothing.

The nothing that no priest dared speak of, that no holy scripture described, that no seer or prophet set forth in ringing proclamation. The nothing, this nothing, it is the soul in waiting.

Comes death, and now the soul waits.

Aranatha opened her eyes, sat up, then reached out to touch Nimander's shoulder. He awoke, looked at her with a question in his eyes.

'He has killed Kedeviss,' she said, the words soft as a breath.

Nimander paled.

'She was right,' Aranatha went on, 'and now we must be careful. Say nothing to anyone else, not yet, or you will see us all die.'

*'Kedeviss.'*

'He has carried her body to a crevasse, and thrown her into it, and now he makes signs on the ground to show her careless steps, the way the edge gave way. He will come to us in shock and grief. Nimander, you must display no suspicion, do you understand?'

And she saw that his own grief would sweep all else aside – at least for now – which was good. Necessary. And that the anger within him, the rage destined to come, would be slow to build, and as it did she would speak to him again, and give him the strength he would need.

Kedeviss had been the first to see the truth – or so it might have seemed. But Aranatha knew that Nimander's innocence was not some innate flaw,

not some fatal weakness. No, his innocence was a choice he had made. The very path of his life. And he had his reasons for that.

Easy to see such a thing and misunderstand it. Easy to see it as a failing, and then to believe him irresolute.

Clip had made this error from the very beginning. And so too this Dying God, who knew only what Clip believed, and thought it truth.

She looked down and saw tears held back, waiting for Clip's sudden arrival with his tragic news, and Aranatha nodded and turned away, to feign sleep.

Somewhere beyond the camp waited a soul, motionless as a startled hare. This was sad. Aranatha had loved Kedeviss dearly, had admired her cleverness, her percipience. Had cherished her loyalty to Nimander – even though Kedeviss had perhaps suspected the strange circumstances surrounding Phaed's death, and had seen how Phaed and her secrets haunted Nimander still.

When one can possess loyalty even in the straits of full, brutal understanding, then that one understands all there is to understand about compassion.

*Kedeviss, you were a gift. And now your soul waits, as it must. For this is the fate of the Tiste Andii. Our fate. We will wait.*

*Until the wait is over.*

*

Endest Silann stood with his back to the rising sun. And to the city of Black Coral. The air was chill, damp with night's breath, and the road wending out from the gates that followed the coastline of the Cut was a bleak, colourless ribbon that snaked into stands of dark conifers half a league to the west. Empty of traffic.

The cloak of eternal darkness shrouding the city blocked the sun's stretching rays, although the western flanks of the jumbled slope to their

right was showing gilt edges; and far off to the left, the gloom of the Cut steamed white from the smooth, black surface.

'There will be,' said Anomander Rake, 'unpleasantness.'

'I know, Lord.'

'It was an unanticipated complication.'

'Yes, it is.'

'I will walk,' said Rake, 'until I reach the tree line. Out of sight, at least until then.'

'Have you waited too long, Lord?'

'No.'

'That is well, then.'

Anomander Rake rested a hand on Endest's shoulder. 'You have ever been, my friend, more than I deserve.'

Endest Silann could only shake his head, refuting that.

'If we are to live,' Rake went on, 'we must take risks. Else our lives become deaths in all but name. There is no struggle too vast, no odds too overwhelming, for even should we fail – should we fall – we will know that we have lived.'

Endest nodded, unable to speak. There should be tears streaming down his face, but he was dry inside – his skull, behind his eyes, all . . . dry. Despair was a furnace where everything had burned up, where everything was ashes, but the heat remained, scalding, brittle and fractious.

'The day has begun.' Rake withdrew his hand and pulled on his gauntlets. 'This walk, along this path . . . I will take pleasure in it, my friend. Knowing that you stand here to see me off.'

And the Son of Darkness set out.

Endest Silann watched. The warrior with his long silver hair flowing, his leather cloak flaring out. Dragnipur a scabbarded slash.

Blue seeped into the sky, shadows in retreat along the slope. Gold painted the tops of the tree line where the road slipped in. At the very edge, Anomander Rake paused, turned about and raised one hand high.

Endest Silann did the same, but the gesture was so weak it made him gasp, and his arm faltered.

And then the distant figure swung round.

And vanished beneath the trees.

# BOOK FOUR

# TOLL THE HOUNDS

Like broken slate
We take our hatred
And pile it high
Rolling with the hills
A ragged line to map
Our rise and fall
And I saw suffused
With the dawn
Crows aligned in rows
Along the crooked wall
Come to feed

Bones lie scattered
At the stone's foot
The heaped ruin
Of past assaults
The crows face each way
To eye the pickings

On both sides
For all its weakness
The world cannot break
What we make
Of our hatred

I watched the workers
Carry each grey rock
They laboured
Blind and stepped
Unerringly modest paths
Piece by sheared piece
They built a slaughter
Of innocent others
While muttering as they might
Of waves of weather
And goodly deeds

*We the Builders*
Hanasp Tular

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pray you never hear an imprecise breath
Caught in its rough web
Every god turns away at the end
And not a whisper sounds
Do not waste a lifetime awaiting death
Caught in its rough web
It hovers in the next moment you must attend
As your last whisper sounds
Pray you never hear an imprecise breath

*Rough Web*
Fisher

The soul knows no greater anguish than to take a breath that begins in love and ends with grief.

Time unravels now. Event clashes upon event. So much to recount, pray this sad-eyed round man does not falter, does not grow too breathless. History has its moments. To dwell within one is to understand nothing.

We are rocked in the tumult, and the awareness of one's own ignorance is a smothering cloak that proves poor armour. You will flinch with the wounds. We shall all flinch.

As might a crow or an owl, or indeed a winged eel, hover now a moment above this fair city, its smoke haze, the scurrying figures in the streets and lanes, the impenetrable dark cracks of narrow alleyways. Thieves' Road spreads a tangled web between buildings. Animals bawl and wives berate husbands and husbands bellow back, night buckets gush from windows down into the guttered alleys and – in some poorer areas of the Gadrobi District – into streets where pedestrians duck and dodge in the morning ritual of their treacherous journeys to work, or home. Clouds of flies are stirred awake with the dawn's light. Pigeons revive their hopeless struggle to walk straight lines. Rats creep back into their closed-in refuges after yet another night of seeing far too much. The night's damp smells are burned off and new stinks arise in pungent vapours.

And on the road, where it passes through the leper colony west of the city, a weary ox and a tired old man escort a burdened cart on which lies a canvas-wrapped figure, worn riding boots visible.

Ahead awaits Two-Ox Gate.

Hover no longer. Plummet both wings and spirit down to the buzzing flies, the animal heat sweet and acrid, the musty closeness of the stained burlap. The old man pausing to wipe sweat from his lined brow with its array of warts and moles, and his knees ache and there is dull pain in his chest.

Of late, he has been carting corpses round day and night, or so it seems. Each one made him feel older, and the glances he has been casting at the ox

are tainted with an irrational dislike, wavering in its intensity, as if the beast was to blame for . . . for something, though he knows not what.

The two guards at the gate were leaning against a wall, staying cool in the shade that would dwindle as the day rolled on overhead. Upon seeing the jutting boots one of the men stepped forward. 'Hold, there. You'll find plenty of cemeteries and pits outside the walls – we don't need more—'

'A citizen of the city,' said the old man. 'Killt in a duel. By Councillor Vidikas, who said to send him back to his friends – the dead man's friends, I mean.'

'Oh, right. On your way, then.'

Crowded as a city can be, an ox drawing a corpse-laden cart will find its path clear, for reasons involving a host of instinctive aversions, few of which made much sense. To see a dead body was to recoil, mind spinning a dust-devil of thoughts – *that is not me – see the difference between us? That is not me, that is not me. No one I know, no one I have ever known. That is not me . . . but . . . it could be.*

*So easily, it could be.*

Remonstrance of mortality is a slap in the face, a stinging shock. It is a struggle for one to overcome this moment, to tighten the armour about one's soul, to see bodies as nothing but objects, unpleasant, to be disposed of quickly. Soldiers and undertakers fashion macabre humour to deflect the simple, raw horror of what they must see, of that to which they are witness. It rarely works. Instead, the soul crawls away, scabbed, wounded, at peace with nothing.

A soldier goes to war. A soldier carries it back home. Could leaders truly comprehend the damage they do to their citizens, they would never send them to war. And if, in knowing, they did so anyway – to appease their hunger for power – then may they choke on the spoils for ever more.

Ah, but the round man digresses. Forgive this raw spasm of rage. A friend lies wrapped in canvas on the bed of a cart. Death is on its way home. Forgive.

Wending through Gadrobi District, life parted its stream, voices dimmed, and it was some time after the passing through of death that those voices arose once more in its wake. Curtains of flies repeatedly billowed open and closed again, until it seemed the ox pulled a stage of a thousand acts, each one the same, and the chorus was a bow wave of silence.

Journey on, comes the prayer of all, journey on.

*

At last, the old man finds his destination and draws the ox up opposite the doors, halting the beast with a tug on its yoke. He spends a moment brushing dust from his clothes, and then heads inside the Phoenix Inn.

It has been a long night. He hobbles to a table and catches the eye of one of the servers. He orders a tankard of strong ale and a breakfast. Stomach before business. The body's not going anywhere, is it?

He did not know if it was love; he suspected he did not understand that word. But there was something inside Cutter that felt . . . sated. Was it just physical, these tangled pitches and rolls and the oil of sweat, breaths hot in his face with the scent of wine and rustleaf? Was it just the taste of the forbidden, upon which he fed as might a bat on nectar? If so, then he should have felt the same when with Scillara, perhaps even more so, since without question Scillara's skills in that area far eclipsed those of Challice, whose hunger whispered of insatiable needs, transforming her lovemaking into a frantic search that found no appeasement, no matter how many times she convulsed in orgasm.

No, something was indeed different. Still, he was troubled, wondering if this strange flavour came from the betrayal they committed time and again. A married woman, the sordid man's conquest. Had he become such a man? Well, he supposed that he had, but not in the manner of those men who made a career of seducing and stealing the wives of other men. And yet, there was a sense, an extraordinary sense, he admitted, of dark pleasure, savage delight, and he could see just how addictive such living could become.

Even so, he was not about to pursue the headlong pitch of promiscuity. There remained a part of him that thirsted for an end – or, rather, a continuation: love and life made stable, forces of reassurance and comfort. He was not about to toss Challice aside and seek out a new lover. He was, he told himself, not Murillio, who could travel with practised ease from bedroom to bedroom – and see where it had got *him*, damn near murdered by some drunken suitor.

Oh, there was a lesson there, yes. At least it seemed that Murillio had heeded it, if the rumours of his 'retirement' were accurate. *And what about me? Have I taken note? It seems not. I still go to her, I still plunge into this betrayal. I go to her, so hungry, so desperate, it is as if we have remade ourselves into perfect reflections. Me and Challice. Hand in hand in our descent.*

*Because it makes the fall easier, doesn't it?*

There was nothing to stop Gorlas Vidikas from exacting vengeance. He would be entirely within his rights to hunt them both down and murder them, and a part of Cutter would not blame him if he did just that.

He was thinking such thoughts as he walked to the annexe warehouse, but they did little to assail his anticipation. Into each other's arms again, desire hot as a fever in their mouths, their hands, their groins. Proof, to Cutter's mind, of the claims of some scholars that humans were but animals – clever ones, but animals none the less. There was no room for thinking, no space for rationality. Consequences thinned to ethereal ghosts, snatched in with the first gasp and flung away in the next. Only the moment mattered.

He made no effort to disguise himself, no effort to mask the destination of his journey, and he well knew how the locals around the warehouse watched him, with that glittering regard that was envy and disgust and amusement in equal parts; much as they had watched Challice perhaps only moments earlier, although in her case lust probably warred with all the other emotions. No, this affair was a brazen thing, and that in itself somehow made it all the more erotic.

There was heat in his mind as he used his key to open the office door, and when he stepped within he could smell her perfume in the dusty air. Through the office and into the cavernous warehouse interior, and then to the wooden steps leading to the loft.

She must have heard his ascent, for she was standing facing the door when he arrived.

Something in her eyes stopped him.

'You have to save me,' she said.

'What has happened?'

'Promise you'll save me, my love. Promise!'

He managed a step forward. 'Of course. What's—'

'He knows.'

The heat of desire evaporated. He was suddenly cold inside.

Challice drew closer and in her face he saw an expression he struggled to identify, and when he did the cold turned into ice. *She is . . . excited.*

'He will kill you. And me. He'll kill us both, Crokus!'

'As is his right—'

In her eyes a sudden fear, and she fixed him with it for a long moment before turning round. 'Maybe *you* have no problem with dying,' she hissed as she walked to the bed, where she faced him again. 'But I have!'

'What do you want me to do?'

'You know what to do.'

'What we *should* do,' he said, 'is run. Take what you can and let's just run. Find some other city—'

'No! I don't want to leave here! I *like* it here! I like the way I live, Crokus!'

'It was just a day or two ago, Challice, that you were lying in my arms and talking about escaping—'

'Just dreams – that wasn't real. I mean, the dream wasn't real. Wasn't realistic – just a stupid dream. You can't take any notice of what I say after we've . . . been together. I just come out with any old thing. Crokus, we're in trouble. We have to do something – we have to do it *now.'*

*You just come out with any old thing, do you, Challice? But it's only after we've been together that you say you love me.*

'He'll kill me,' she whispered.

'That doesn't sound like the Gorlas you've been describing.'

She sat down on the bed. 'He confronted me. Yesterday.'

'You didn't mention—'

She shook her head. 'It seemed, well, it seemed it was just the usual game. He said he wanted to know about you, and I said I'd tell him when he got back – he's at the mines right now. And then, and then, walking here just now – O gods! I suddenly understood! Don't you see? *He was asking about the man he planned to kill!'*

'So he plans to kill me. What of it, Challice?'

She bared her teeth, and it was an expression so brutal, so ugly, that Cutter was shocked. 'I said I *understood*. First you. Then he'll come back to me, so he can tell me what he did to you. In every detail. He will use every word like a knife – until he pulls out the real one. And then he'll cut my throat.' She looked up at him. 'Is that what you want? Does his killing me matter to you, Crokus?'

'He won't kill you—'

'You don't know him!'

'It sounds as if you don't, either.' At her glare, he added, 'Look, assume he'll take pleasure in killing me, and he will. And then, even more pleasure in telling you all about it – yes? We're agreed on that?'

She nodded, a single motion, tight.

'But if he then kills you, what has he got? Nothing. No, he'll want you to do it again, with someone else. Over and over again, and each time it'll turn out the same – he kills your lover, he tells you about it. He doesn't want all that to end. The man's a duellist, right, one who likes killing his opponents. This way, he can lawfully do it to as many men as you care to collect, Challice. He wins, you win—'

'How can you say *I win*!'

'—because,' he finished, 'neither of you gets bored.'

She stared at him as if he had just kicked in some invisible door hidden inside her. And then recovered. 'I don't want you to die, Crokus. Cutter – I keep forgetting. It's *Cutter* now. A dangerous name. An *assassin's* name. Careful, or someone might think there's something real behind it.'

'Which is it, Challice? You don't want me to die. Or am I the man I pretend to be? What is it, exactly, you're trying to appeal to?'

'But I love you!'

And there was that word again. And whatever it meant to her probably was not what it meant to him – not that he knew what it meant to him, of course. He moved to one side, as if intent on circling the bed even if it took him through the outer wall, then halted and ran his hands through his hair. 'Have you been leading me to this moment all along?'

'What?'

He shook his head. 'Just wondering out loud. It's not important.'

'I want my life as it is, Cutter, only without him. I want you instead of him. That's how I want it.'

*What would Murillio say in this situation? But no, I'm not Murillio.*

*Still . . .*

*He'd be out through this window in a heartbeat. Duels with wronged husbands? Hood's breath!* He faced her. 'Is that what you want?'

'I just told you it was!'

'No, that's not what I meant. I meant . . . oh, never mind.'

'You have to do it. For me. For us.'

'He's at the mines west of the city? For how much longer?'

'Two days at least. You can go out there.'

And suddenly she was standing in front of him, hands on the sides of his face, her body pressing hard, and he stared down into her dilated eyes.

*Excitement.*

*I used to think . . . that look – this look . . . I used to think . . .*

'My love,' she whispered. 'It has to be done. You see that, don't you?'

*But it was always this, just this. Leading up to this moment. Where she was taking me – or have I got it all wrong?*

'Challice—'

But her mouth was on his now, and she swallowed down all his words, until none were left.

Spin round and rush back. Murillio still lies in the dust, a crowd mechanically cheering in the pit below. The day draws to a close, and a youth named Venaz gathers his gang of followers and sets out for the tunnel called Steep.

Not much need be said about Venaz. But let us give him this. Sold to the mine by his stepfather – dear Ma too drunk to even lift her head when the collectors showed up and if she heard the clinking of coins, well, her thoughts would have crawled the short distance to the moment when she could buy another bottle, and no further. That had been four years ago.

The lesson that a child is not loved, not even by the one who bore it, delivers a most cruel wound. One that never heals, but instead stretches scar tissue over the mind's eye, so that for that orphan's entire life the world beyond is tainted, and it sees what others do not, and is blinded by perpetual mistrust to all that the heart feels. Such was Venaz, but to know is not to excuse, and we shall leave it there.

Venaz's pack consisted of boys a year or so younger than him. They vied with each other for position in the pecking order and were as vicious individually as they were in a group. They were just versions of him, variations only on the surface. They followed and would do anything he told them to, at least until he stumbled, made a mistake. And then they would close in like half-starved wolves.

Venaz walked emboldened, excited, delighted at this amazing turn of events. The Big Man wanted Harllo and not to pat him on the head either. No, there would be even more blood spilled on this day, and if Venaz could work it right, why, he might be the one to spill it – at the Big Man's nod, that's all it would take, and maybe the Big Man would see how good Venaz could be. Good enough, maybe, to recruit him into his own household. Every noble needed people like Venaz, to do the ugly stuff, the bad stuff.

They reached the slope leading to the mouth of the tunnel. Three grown-ups were trying to fix the axle of a cart and they looked up when Venaz arrived.

'Where's Bainisk?' Venaz asked.

'New vein,' one of them replied. 'He in trouble again?'

'He got his moles with him?' It felt good being so important he didn't have to answer the man's question.

Shrugs all round.

Venaz scowled. 'Has he got his moles with him?'

The one who'd spoken slowly straightened. His backhanded slap caught Venaz by surprise, and was hard enough to knock the boy back. He was then grabbed and thrown on to the stony ground. The man stood over him. 'Watch your mouth.'

Venaz sat up, glaring. 'You ain't seen what just happened? Up on the ridge?'

Another grunted. 'We heard 'bout something.'

'A duel – the Big Man killed someone!'

'So what?'

'And then he called for Harllo! He wants Harllo! And I come to get him and you're stopping me and when he hears—'

He got no further as the man who had struck him now grasped him by the throat and dragged him to his feet. 'He won't hear nothing, Venaz. You think we give a fuck about Vidikas having a fuckin' duel? Killin' some poor bastard for what? Our entertainment?'

'He's turnin' blue, Haid. Better loosen yer grip some.'

Venaz gasped an agonizing lungful of air.

'Get it right, lad,' Haid went on, 'Vidikas *owns* us. We're pieces of meat to him, right? So he puts out a call for one of us and for what? Why, to chew it up, that poor piece of meat. And what, you think that's a fuckin' good idea? Get outa my sight, Venaz, but you can count on me rememberin' this.'

The pack was huddled together now, white-faced, but among some of them there was something rather more calculating. Was this the moment to usurp Venaz? The three men went back to working on the axle. Venaz, his colour returning to normal, dusted himself off and then set out in a stiff-legged march towards the tunnel mouth. His pack fell in behind him.

As they plunged into the cool gloom Venaz wheeled. 'That was Haid and Favo and Dule, right? Remember them names. They're on my list now, all three of them. They're on my list.'

Faces nodded.

And those who had been weighing their chances each realized that the moment had passed. They'd been too slow. Venaz had a way of recovering, and fast, scary fast. He was, they reminded themselves yet again, going places, without a doubt.

Harllo slid along the vein, feeling with his bare stomach the purity of the black silver and, yes, it *was* silver and where had it come from when all they'd been working for so long was copper up on the skins and iron down

deep? But it felt so beautiful, this silver. Better than gold, better than anything.

Wait till he told Bainisk and Bainisk told the foreman! They'd be heroes. They might even get extra portions at supper, or a cup of watered wine!

The chute was narrow, so small they'd need moles for weeks before it got worked out big enough to take the pickers, so there was a good chance that Harllo would be seeing – and feeling – a lot more of this silver, every day, maybe.

And all that trouble from before would go away, just like that – he knew it would—

'Harllo!'

The voice whispered up from somewhere behind his feet, reminding him that he was still head down and that could be dangerous. He might pass out and not even know it. 'I'm all right, Bainisk! I found—'

'Harllo! Get back here right now!'

A shiver ran through Harllo. Bainisk's voice didn't sound right. It sounded . . . scared.

But that wouldn't last, would it? Not with the silver—

*'Hurry!'*

Moving backwards was never easy. He pushed with his hands, squirmed and pressed his toes against the hard stone and then extended his heels. There were leather pads tied to his feet for this purpose, but it still hurt. Like a caterpillar, gathering up and then pushing, bit by bit, working his way back up the chute.

All at once hands grasped his ankles and he was being roughly dragged.

Harllo cried out as his chin struck an obstruction and when he lifted his head up the top crunched on rock, scraping away skin and hair. 'Bainisk! What—'

He fell free of the chute, thumping down. The hands released his ankles and now grasped his upper arms, lifting him to his feet.

'Bainisk—'

'Shhh! Word's come down – someone came to find you – from the city.'

'What?'

'Vidikas killed him – in a duel – and now he's called for you to be brought to him. It's bad, Harllo. I think he's going to kill you!'

But this was too much to hear, too much all at once – someone had come – who? Gruntle! And Vidikas had . . . had killed him. *No. He couldn't have – he didn't*— 'Who was he?' he asked.

'I don't know. Listen, we're going to escape, you and me, Harllo – do you understand?'

'But how can we—'

'We're going deeper in, to the Settle—'

'But that's not safe—'

'There are huge cracks on that side – some of them, they got to go right up and out, lakeside. We get there, and then along the shoreline, all the way back to the city!'

They had been hissing back and forth, and now they heard shouts echoing down from the main passage.

'Venaz – that figures, doesn't it? Come on, Harllo, we got to go *now*!'

They set out, each with a lantern, Bainisk taking a coil of rope as well, down through the fresh workings – there was no one there yet, as first the air had been bad and then there'd been flooding and only the shift before the last of the hoses was snaked out to see how much more water was seeping back in. After fifty or so paces they were ankledeep in icy water and flows slicked the side walls and drops rained down from the ceiling. The farther in they went, the more cracks they saw – everywhere, all sides, above and below – proof that they were reaching the Settle, where half a cliff was

sinking towards the lake. The rumours were that it was only days from collapse.

The tunnel descended in irregular shelves, and now the water was at Harllo's thighs, numbingly cold. Both were gasping.

'Bainisk – will this go back up?'

'It will, if the water's not too deep, it will, I promise.'

'Why – why are you doing this? You should've just handed me over.'

Bainisk was some time before answering. 'I want to see it, Harllo.'

'You want to see what?'

'The city. I – I just want to see it, that's all. When I heard, well, it was as if everything fell into place. This was the time – our best chance – this close to the Settle.'

'You'd been thinking about this.'

'Yes. Harllo, I *never* stop thinking about this.'

'The city.'

'The city.'

Something clanged somewhere behind them – still distant, but closer than expected.

'Venaz! They're after us – shit – come on, Harllo, we got to hurry.'

The water reached Harllo's hips. He was having trouble working his legs. He kept stumbling. Twice he almost let his lantern sink down too far. Their desperate gasping echoed on all sides, along with sloshing water.

'Bainisk, I can't—'

'Drop your light – just take hold of my shirt – I'll pull you. Don't let go.'

Groaning, Harllo let the lantern sink into the water. A sudden hiss, something cracking. When he released the handle the lantern vanished into the blackness. He took hold of Bainisk's ragged shirt.

They continued on, Harllo feeling his legs trailing behind him but only from the hips – below that there was nothing. A strange lassitude flowed into him, taking away the icy cold. Bainisk was chest-deep now, whimpering as he sought to keep the lantern held high.

They stopped.

'The tunnel goes under,' said Bainisk.

'Issallright, Bainisk. We gan stop now.'

'No, hold on to this ledge. I'm going under. I won't be long. I promise.'

He set the lantern on a narrow ledge. And then he sank down and was gone.

Harllo was alone. It would be much easier to let go, to relax his aching hands. Venaz was coming, he'd be here soon. And then it would be over. The water was warm now – that might be one way to escape them. Do what Bainisk had just done. Just sink away, vanish.

He wasn't wanted, he knew. Not by his mother, not by anyone. And the one who'd come to find him, well, that man had died for that. And that wasn't right. Nobody should go and die for Harllo. Not Gruntle, not Bainisk, not anybody. So, no more of any of that – he could let go—

Foaming water, thrashing, gasps and coughs. An icy hand clutched at Harllo.

'We can get through! Harllo – the tunnel on the other side – it slopes upward!'

'I can't—'

'You have to! The city, Harllo, you have to show it to me – I'd be lost. I need you, Harllo. *I need you.'*

'All right, but . . .' He was about to tell Bainisk the truth. About the city. That it wasn't the paradise he'd made it out to be. That people starved there. That people did bad things to each other. But no, that could wait. It'd be bad to talk about those things right now. 'All right, Bainisk.'

They left the lantern. Bainisk uncoiled some of the rope and tied the end about Harllo's waist, fumbling with numbed hands on the knot. 'Take a few deep breaths first,' he said. 'And then one more, deep as you can.'

The plunge into the dark left Harllo instantly disoriented. The rope round his waist pulled him down and then into the face of the current. He opened his eyes and felt the thrill of shock from the icy flow. Strange glowing streaks flashed past, possibly from the rock itself, or perhaps they were but ghosts lurking behind his eyes. At first he sought to help Bainisk, flailing with his arms and trying to kick, but after a moment he simply went limp.

Either Bainisk would pull them both through, or he wouldn't. Either way was fine.

His mind began to drift, and he so wanted to take a breath – he couldn't hold back much longer. His lungs were burning. The water would be cool, cool enough to quench that fire for ever more. Yes, he could do that.

Cold bit into his right hand – *what?* And then his head was lifted above the surface. And he was sucking in icy lungfuls of air.

Darkness, the rush and gurgle of water flowing past, seeking to pull him back, back and down. But Bainisk was tugging him along, and it was getting shallower as the tunnel widened. The black, dripping ceiling seemed to be sagging, forming a crooked spine overhead. Harllo stared up at it, wondering how he could see at all.

And then he was being dragged across broken stone.

They halted, lying side by side.

Before too long, the shivering began. Racing into Harllo like demonic possession, a spirit that shook through him with rabid glee. His teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Bainisk was plucking at him. Through clacking teeth he said, 'Venaz won't stop. He'll see the lantern – he'll know. We got to keep going, Harllo. It's the only way to get warm again, the only way to get away.'

But it was so hard to climb to his feet. His legs still didn't work properly. Bainisk had to help him and he leaned heavily on the bigger boy as they staggered skidding upslope along the scree-scattered path.

It seemed to Harllo that they walked for ever, into and out of faint light. Sometimes the slope pitched downward, only to slowly climb yet again. Pain throbbed in Harllo's legs now, but it was welcome – life was returning, filled with its stubborn fire, and now he wanted to live, now it mattered more than anything else.

'Look!' Bainisk gasped. 'At what we're walking on – Harllo, look!'

Phosphorescent mould limned the walls, and in the faint glow Harllo could make out the vague shapes of the rubble underfoot. Broken pottery. Small fragments of burned bone.

'It's got to lead up,' Bainisk said. 'To some cave. The Gadrobi used them to bury their ancestors. A cave overlooking the lake. We're almost there.'

Instead, they reached a cliff ledge.

And stood, silent.

A vertical section of rock had simply plummeted away, leaving a broad gap. The bottom of the fissure was swallowed in black, from which warm air rose in dry gusts. Opposite them, ten or more paces across, a slash of diffuse light revealed the continuation of the tunnel they had been climbing.

'We'll climb down,' said Bainisk, uncoiling the rope and starting to tie a knot at one end. 'And then back up. We can do this, you'll see.'

'What if the rope's not long enough? I can't see the bottom, Bainisk.'

'We'll just find more handholds.' Now he was tying a loop at the other end which he then set round a knob-like projection. 'I'll throw a snake back up to dislodge this, so we can take the rope with us for the climb up the other side. Now, you go first.' He tossed the rest of the rope over the edge. They heard it snap out to its full length. Bainisk grunted. 'Like I said, we can find handholds.'

Harllo worked his way over the side, gripping hard the wet rope – it wanted to slide through, but if that happened he knew he was dead, so he held tight. His feet scrambled, found shallow ledges running at an angle across the cliff-face. Not much, but they eased the strain. He began working his way down.

He was perhaps three body-lengths down when Bainisk began following. The rope began swaying unpredictably, and Harllo found his feet slipping from their scant purchases again and again, each time resulting in a savage tug on his arms.

'Bainisk!' he hissed. 'Wait! Let me go a little farther down first – you're throwing me about.'

'Okay. Go on.'

Harllo found purchase again and resumed the descent.

If Bainisk started up again he no longer felt the sways and tugs. The rope was getting wetter, which meant that he was reaching its end – the water was soaking its way down. And then he reached the sodden knot. Sudden panic as he sought to find projections in the wall for his feet. There were very few – the stone was almost sheer.

'Bainisk! I'm at the knot!' He craned his neck to look down. Blackness, unrelieved, depthless. 'Bainisk! Where are you?'

Since Harllo's first call, Bainisk had not moved. The last thing he wanted to do was accidentally dislodge the boy, not after they'd made it this far. And, truth be told, he was experiencing a growing fear. This wall was too even – no cracks, the strata he could feel little more than ripples at a steeply canted angle. They would never be able to hold on once past the rope – and there was nothing he could use to slip the loop round.

They were, he realized, in trouble.

Upon hearing Harllo's last call – the boy reaching the knot – he readied himself to resume his descent.

And there was a sharp upward tug on the rope.

He looked up. Vague faces peering over, hands and more hands reaching to close on the rope. Venaz – yes, there he was, grinning.

'Got you,' he murmured, low and savage. 'Got you both, Bainisk.'

Another tug upward.

Bainisk drew his knife one-handed. He reached down to cut the rope beneath him, and then hesitated, looking up once more at Venaz's face.

Maybe that had been his own, only a few years ago. That face, so eager to take over, to rule the moles. Well, Venaz could have them. He could have it all.

Bainisk reached up with the knife, just above his fist where it held tight. And he sliced through.

*

Dig heels in, it will not help. We must wing back to the present. For everything to be understood, every facet must flash alight at least once. Earlier, the round man begged forgiveness. Now, he pleads for trust. His is a sure hand, even if it trembles. Trust.

A bard sits opposite an historian. At a nearby table in K'rul's Bar, Blend watches Scillara unfolding coils of smoke from her mouth. There is something avid in that gaze, but every now and then a war erupts in her eyes, when she thinks of the woman lying in a coma upstairs. When she thinks of her, yes. Blend has taken to sleeping in the bed with Picker, has taken to trying all she could think of to awaken sensation once more in her lover. But nothing has worked. Picker's soul is lost, wandering far from the cool, flaccid flesh.

Blend hates herself now, as she senses her soul ready to move on, to seek the blessing of a new life, a new body to explore and caress, new lips to press upon her own.

But this is silly. Scillara's amiability was ever casual. She was a woman who preferred a man's charms, such as they were. And truth be told, Blend

had played in that crib more than once herself. So why now has this lust awakened? What made it so wild, so needy?

Loss, my dear. Loss is like a goad, a stinging shove that sets one lunging forward seeking handholds, seeking ecstasy, delicious surrender, even the lure of self-destruction. The bud cut at the stem throws its last energy into one final flowering, one glorious exclamation. *The flower defies*, to quote in entirety an ancient Tiste Andii poem. Life runs from death. It must, it cannot help it. *Life runs*, to quote a round man's epitome of poetic brevity.

Slip into Blend's mind, ease in behind her eyes, and watch as she watches, feel as she feels, if you dare.

Or try Antsy, there at the counter on which are arrayed seven crossbows, twelve flatpacks of quarrels amounting to one hundred and twenty darts, six shortswords, three throwing axes of Falari design, a Genabarii broadsword and buckler, two local rapiers with fancy quillons – so fancy the weapons were snagged together and Antsy had spent an entire morning trying to separate them, with no luck – and a small sack containing three sharpers. He is trying to decide what to wear.

But the mission they were about to set out on was meant to be peaceful, so he should just wear his shortsword as usual, peace-strapped as usual, everything as usual, in fact. But then there were assassins out there who wanted Antsy's head on a dagger point, so maybe keeping things usual was in fact suicidal. So he should strap on at least two shortswords, throw a couple of crossbows over his shoulders and hold the broadsword in his right hand and the twin rapiers in his left, with a flatpack tied to each hip, the sharper sack at his belt, and a throwing axe between his teeth – no, that's ridiculous, he'd break his jaw trying that. Maybe an extra shortsword, but then he might cut his own tongue out the first time he tried saying anything and he was sure to try saying something eventually, wasn't he?

But he could run the scabbards for all six shortswords through his belt, and end up wearing a skirt of shortswords, but that'd be all right, wouldn't it? But then, where would he carry the sharpers? One knock against a pommel or hilt and he'd be an expanding cloud of whiskers and weapon bits. And what about the crossbows? He'd need to load them all up but keep

everything away from the releases, unless he wanted to end up skewering all his friends with the first stumble.

What if—

What's that? Back to Blend, please? Flesh against flesh, the weight of full breasts in hands, one knee pushing up between parted thighs, sweat a blending of sweet oils, soft lips trying to merge, tongues dancing eager and slick as—

'I can't wear alla this!'

Scillara glanced over. 'Really, Antsy? Didn't Blend say that about a bell ago?'

'What? Who? Her? What does she know?'

To that entirely unselfconscious display of irony, Blend could only raise her brows when she caught Scillara's eye.

Scillara smiled in response, then drew again on her pipe.

Blend glanced over at the bard, and then said to Antsy, 'We're safe out there now, anyway.'

Eyes bulging, Antsy stared at her in disbelief. 'You'd take the word of some damned minstrel? What does he know?'

'You keep asking what does anyone know, when it's obvious that whatever they know you're not listening to anyway.'

'What?'

'Sorry, that so confused me I doubt I could repeat it. The contract's cancelled – Fisher said so.'

Antsy wagged his head from side to side. 'Fisher said so!' He jabbed a finger at the bard. 'He's not Fisher – not the famous one, anyway. He's just stolen the name! If he was famous he wouldn't be just sittin' there, would he? Famous people don't do that.'

'Really?' the bard who called himself Fisher asked. 'What are we supposed to do, Antsy?'

'Famous people do famous things, alla time. Everybody knows that!'

'The contract has been bought out,' the bard said. 'But if you want to dress as if preparing for a single-handed assault on Moon's Spawn, you go right ahead.'

'Rope! Do I need rope? Let me think!' And to aid in this process Antsy began pacing, moustache twitching.

Blend wanted to pull a boot off and push her foot between Scillara's thighs. No, she wanted to crawl right in there. Staking a claim. With a hiss of frustration she stood, hesitated, and then went to sit down at the bard's table. She fixed him with an intense stare, to which he responded with a raised brow.

'There're more songs supposedly composed by Fisher than anyone else I've ever heard of.'

The man shrugged.

'Some of them are a hundred years old.'

'I was a prodigy.'

'Were you now?'

Duiker spoke. 'The poet is immortal.'

She turned to face him. 'Is that some kind of general, ideological statement, Historian? Or are you talking about the man sharing this table with you?'

Antsy cursed suddenly and then said, 'I don't need any rope! Who put that into my head? Let's get going – I'm taking this shortsword and a sharper and anybody gets too close to me or looks suspicious they can eat the sharper for breakfast!'

'We'll stay here,' Duiker said when Blend hesitated. 'The bard and me. I'll look in on Picker.'

'All right. Thanks.'

Antsy, Blend and Scillara set out.

The journey took them from the Estates District and into Daru District, along the Second Tier Wall. The city had fully awakened now, and in places the crowds were thick with the endless machinery of living. Voices and smells and needs and wants, hungers and thirsts, laughter and irritation, misery and joy, and the sunlight fell on everything it could reach and shadows retreated wherever they could.

Temporary barriers blocked the three foreigners here and there – a cart jammed sideways in a narrow street, a carthorse dropped dead with its legs sticking up, half a family pinned under the upended cart. A swarm of people round a small collapsed building, stealing every dislodged brick and shard of lumber, and if anyone had been trapped in it, alas, no one was looking for them.

Scillara walked like a woman bred to be admired. And oh, yes, people noticed. In other circumstances, Blend – being another woman – might have resented that, but then she'd made a career out of not being noticed; and besides, she counted herself among the admirers.

'Friendly people, these Darujhistanii,' said Scillara as they finally swung south from the wall, heading for the southwest corner of the district.

'They're smiling,' said Blend, 'because they want a roll with you. And clearly you haven't noticed the wives and such, all looking as if they swallowed something sour.'

'Maybe they did.'

'Oh they did, all right. The truth that men are men, that's what they've swallowed.'

Antsy snorted. 'What else would men be but men? Your problem, Blend, is you see too much, even when it's not there.'

'Oh, and what have you been noticing, Antsy?'

'Suspicious people, that's what.'

'What suspicious people?'

'The ones who keep staring at us, of course.'

'That's because of Scillara – what do you think we've just been talking about?'

'Maybe they are, maybe they ain't. Maybe they're assassins, lookin' to jump us.'

'That old man back there who got his ear boxed by his wife was an assassin? What kind of Guild are they running here?'

'You don't know she was his wife,' Antsy retorted. 'And you don't know but that was a signal to somebody on a roof. We could be walking right into an ambush!' 'Of course,' agreed Blend, 'that woman was his mother, because Guild rules state that Ma's got to come along to make sure he's got the hand signals down, and that he eats all his lunch and his knives are sharp and he's tied up his moccasins right so he doesn't trip in the middle of his murderous lunge at Sergeant Antsy.'

'I ain't so lucky he trips,' Antsy said in a growl. 'In case you ain't noticed, Blend, it's been a run of the Lord's push for us. Oponn's got it in for me, especially.'

'Why?' Scillara asked.

'Because I don't believe in the Twins, that's why. Luck – it's all bad. Oponn only pulls now to push later. If you've been pulled, it don't end there. Never does. No, you can expect the push to come any time and all you know for sure is it's gonna come, that push. Every time. In fact, we're all as good as dead.'

'Well,' said Scillara, 'I can't argue with that. Sooner or later, Hood takes us all, and that's the only certainty there is.'

'Aren't you two cheerful this morning,' Blend observed. 'Look, here we are.'

They had arrived at the Warden Barracks, suitably sombre and foreboding.

Blend saw an annexe fronting the blockish building with barred windows and set out towards it, the other two following.

A guard lounging outside the door watched them approach, and then said, 'Check your weapons at the front desk. You here to visit someone?'

'No,' snorted Antsy, 'we've come to break 'im out!' And then he laughed. 'Haha.'

No one found the joke at all amusing, especially after the sharper was found and correctly identified. Antsy then made the mistake of getting belligerent, in the midst of five or six stern-visaged constabulary, which led to a scuffle and then an arrest.

When all was said and done, Antsy found himself in a lock-up with three drunks, only one of whom was conscious – singing some old Fisher classic in a broken-hearted voice – and a fourth man who seemed to be entirely mad, convinced as he was that everyone he saw was wearing a mask, which was hiding something demonic, horrible, bloodthirsty. He'd been arrested for trying to tear off a merchant's face and he eyed Antsy speculatively before evidently deciding that the red-whiskered foreigner looked too tough to take on, at least while he was still awake.

The sentence was three days long, provided Antsy proved a model prisoner. Any trouble and it could stretch out some more.

As a result of all this, it was some time before Scillara and Blend managed to gain permission to see Barathol Mekhar. They met him in a holding cell while two guards stood flanking the single door, shortswords drawn.

Noting this, Scillara said, 'Making friends in here, are you?'

The blacksmith looked somewhat shamefaced as he shrugged. 'I had no intention of resisting the arrest, Scillara. My apprentice, alas, decided otherwise.' Anxiety tightened his features as he asked, 'Any news of him? Has he been captured? Is he hurt?'

Scillara shrugged. 'We've not seen or heard anything like that, Barathol.'

'I keep telling them here, he's only a child in his head. It was my responsibility, all of it. But he went and broke some bones and noses, and they're pretty annoyed about that.'

Blend cleared her throat. Something was going back and forth between Barathol and Scillara and it made her uneasy. 'Barathol, we can pay the fine to the Guild, but that scrap you had, that one's more serious.'

He nodded morosely. 'Hard labour, yes. Six months or so.' There was the twitch of a grin. 'And guess who I will be working for?'

'Who?'

'Eldra Foundry. And in six months I'll earn my ticket as a smith, since that's allowed. Some kind of rehabilitation programme.'

Scillara's throaty laugh straightened up both guards. 'Well, that's one way to get there, I suppose.'

He nodded. 'I went about it all wrong, it seems.'

'I'm not sure,' said Scillara. 'Is the Guild happy with that? I mean, it's sort of a way round them, isn't it?'

'They've no choice. Every Guild in the city has to comply, barring, I suppose, the Assassins' Guild. Obviously, for most prisoners six months working in a trade might earn them an apprentice grade of some sort – but there's no limit to how fast you can advance. Just pass the exams and that's that.'

Scillara looked ready to burst out laughing. Even Barathol was struggling.

Blend sighed and then said, 'I'll go settle the fine. Consider it a loan.'

'Much appreciated, Blend, and thank you.'

'Remembering Kalam,' she replied, heading out. Neither guard paid her any attention. But she was used to that.

A bhokaral answered the door. High Alchemist Baruk stared down at it for a long moment before concluding that this was nothing more than a bhokaral. Not a demon, not Soletaken. Just a bhokaral, its little wizened

face scrunched up in belligerent regard, spiky ears twitching. When it made to close the postern door again Baruk stepped forward and held it open.

Sudden outrage and indignation. Hissing, spitting, making faces, the bhokaral shook a fist at Baruk and then fled down the corridor.

The High Alchemist closed the door behind him and made his way along the corridor. He could now hear other bhokarala, a cacophony of bestial voices joining in with the first one, raising an alarm that echoed through the temple. At a branching of the passageway he came upon an old Dal Honese woman tearing apart a straw broom. She glared up at Baruk and snapped something in some tribal tongue, then made squiggly gestures with the fingers of her left hand.

The High Alchemist scowled. 'Retract that curse, witch.

Now.'

'You'll not be so bold when the spiders come for you.'

'Now,' he repeated, 'before I lose my temper.'

'Bah! You're not worth the effort anyway!' And all at once she collapsed into a heap of spiders that scurried in all directions.

Baruk blinked, and then quickly stepped back. But none of the creatures skittered his way. Moments later they had inexplicably vanished, although not a single crack or seam was visible.

'High Alchemist.'

He looked up. 'Ah, High Priestess. I did knock—'

'And a bhokaral let you in, yes. They're in the habit of doing that, having chased away most of my acolytes.'

'I wasn't aware bhokarala were in the habit of infestation.'

'Yes, well. Have you come to speak to me or the chosen . . . mouthpiece of Shadowthrone?'

'I do not believe you have been entirely usurped, High Priestess.'

'Your generosity is noted.'

'Why is there a witch of Ardatha in your temple?'

'Yes, why? Come with me.'

The Magus of Shadow – *gods below* – was sitting on the floor in the altar chamber, sharpening knives. A dozen such weapons were scattered round him, each one of a different design. '. . . tonight,' he was muttering, 'they all die! Cut throats, cleaved hearts, pierced eyeballs, pared-back fingernails. Mayhem and slaughter. Clippings—' and then he glanced up, started guiltily, licked his lips once and suddenly smiled. 'Welcome, High Barukness. Isn't it a lovely day?'

'High Alchemist Baruk, Magus. And no, it is not a lovely day. What are you doing?'

His eyes darted. 'Doing? Nothing, can't you see that?' He paused. 'Can't he smell them? Close, oh so close! It's going to be a mess and whose fault will that be? A real mess – nothing to do with Iskaral Pust, though! I am perfect.' He attempted an expression of innocence. 'I am perfect . . . ly – perfectly – fine.'

Baruk could not help himself, turning to Sordiko Qualm. 'What was Shadowthrone thinking?'

The question clearly depressed her. 'I admit to a crisis of faith, High Alchemist.'

Iskaral Pust leapt to his feet. 'Then you must pray, my love. To me, since Shadowthrone sees through my eyes, hears through my ears, smells through my nose.' He crossed his eyes and added in a different tone, 'Farts through my bung-hole, too, but that would be too offensive to mention.' He struggled to correct his gaze and smiled again. 'Sordiko, my sweetness, there are very special, very secret prayers. And, er, rituals. See me after this man has left, there's no time to waste!' Bhokarala were creeping into the chamber. A score of them, moving with pointless stealth, all converging on Iskaral Pust – who seemed entirely unaware of them as he winked at Sordiko Qualm.

'High Priestess,' said Baruk, 'you have my sympathy.'

'I have news from Shadowthrone,' Iskaral Pust said. 'This is why I have summoned you, Baruchemist.'

'You did not summon me.'

'I didn't? But I must have. At least, I was supposed to.' He tilted his head. 'He's another idiot, nothing but idiots on all sides. There's just me and Sordiko darling, against the world. Well, we shall triumph!'

'Shadowthrone?' Baruk prompted.

'What? Who? Oh, him.'

'Through your mouth.'

'Brilliance shall pass, yes yes. Let me think, let me think. What was that message again? I forget. Wait! Wait, hold on. It was . . . what was it? Set a watch on the Urs Gate. That's it, yes. Urs Gate. Or was it Foss Gate? Raven Gate? Worry Gate? Cutter Gate? Two-Ox?'

'Yes,' said Baruk, 'that's all of them.'

'Urs, yes, it must have been. Urs.'

Sordiko Qualm looked ready to weep.

Baruk rubbed at his eyes, and then nodded. 'Very well. I shall take my leave then.' He bowed to the High Priestess.

The bhokarala rushed in. Each stole a knife and then, with shrieks, they raced away clutching their prizes.

Iskaral Pust stared agape, and then pulled at the two snarls of hair above his ears. 'Evil!' he screamed. 'They knew! They knew all my plans! How? *How?'*

'Now, what shall I do with you?'

Chaur watched her with doleful eyes. He had been crying again, his eyes puffy, two runnels of snot streaking down to his reddened, chapped lips.

'We must assume,' Spite continued, 'that Barathol is unavoidably indisposed – of course, at the moment all we can do is assume, since in truth we have no idea what's happened to him. One thing is obvious, and that is that he cannot come here. If he could he would have, right? Come to collect you, Chaur.'

He was moments from bawling again. The simple mention of Barathol threatened to set him off.

Spite tapped her full lips with one long, perfectly manicured finger. 'Unfortunately, I will need to leave here soon. Can I trust you to stay here, Chaur? Can I?'

He nodded.

'Are you sure?'

He nodded again, and then wiped his nose, rather messily.

She frowned. 'Dear me, you're a sight. Do you realize it is nothing more than certain pathways in your brain that are in disarray? A practitioner of High Denul could work wonders for you, Chaur. It's a thought, isn't it? Oh, I know, you don't have "thoughts" as such. You have . . . impulses, and confusion, and these two make up the man known as Chaur. And, barring times such as this one, you are mostly happy, and perhaps that is not something to be fiddled with. The gods know, happiness is a precious and rare commodity, and indeed it seems that the more intelligent and perceptive the individual, the less happy they generally are. The cost of seeing things as they are, I expect.

'Then, of course, there is my sister. My smiling murderess sibling. My vicious, ice-cold, treacherous kin. She happens to be almost as intelligent as me, and yet she is immune to unhappiness. A quality, I suspect, of her particular insanity.

'Anyway, Chaur, you will need to remain here, staying out of sight. For I must pay my sister a visit. For a word or two. Soon, yes?'

He nodded.

'Now, let's get you cleaned up. I wouldn't want to upset Barathol and neither would you, I'm sure.'

Now, Chaur was good at understanding people most of the time. He was good at nodding, too. But on occasion understanding and nodding did not quite match. This was such a time.

But more of that later.

The carter failed to complete his breakfast, as it did not take long for someone to take note of the wrapped corpse, and then to bring word in to Meese that some fool had left a body in the bed of the cart outside the inn – hardly the kind of positive advertisement any inn might welcome, even the Phoenix. Swearing, Meese went out to see for herself, and something about those boots looked familiar. With a suddenly cold heart, she pulled the canvas back from Murillio's face.

Things happened quickly then: wretched comprehension, word's swift rush, and finally, the dusty, lifeless place in the soul that was grief. Abject sense of uselessness, the pummelling assault that is shock. The carter was cornered by Irilta and, seeing the strait he'd found himself in, the old man was quick to tell everyone all he knew.

The short, round man at the back of the room rose then with a sober expression and quietly took charge. He told Irilta and Meese to carry the body to a spare room upstairs, which they did with heartrending tenderness. Word was sent out to Coll. As for the others, well, everyone returned to the Phoenix Inn eventually, and so the ordeal of relaying the bad news would not end soon, and each time the emotions would well up once more. The living felt this new burden and they could see that the next few days would be without pleasure, without ease, and already everyone felt exhausted, and not even Kruppe was immune.

A dear friend is dead, and there is nothing just in death. When the moment arrives, it is always too soon. The curse of incompletion, the loss that can never be filled. Before too long, rising like jagged rocks from the flood, there was anger.

The carter was made to explain again about the visit to a mining camp, the duel over some boy, and the victor's instructions that the body be returned to the Phoenix Inn. That was all he knew, he swore it, and for the moment none but Kruppe – wise Kruppe, clever Kruppe – comprehended who that boy must have been.

Must he now visit a certain duelling school? Possibly.

The ordeal of the burden, the dread weight of terrible news – the witnessing of another crushed spirit, oh, this was a fell day indeed. A most sad, fell day.

And on this night, widows will weep, and so shall we.

Two men are converging on the Phoenix Inn. Which one arrives first changes everything. If the redressing of balance truly existed beyond nature – in the realm of humanity, that is – then Rallick Nom would have been the first to hear of his friend's death; and he would have set out, hard-eyed, to take upon himself a new burden, for although vengeance salved certain spiritual needs, cold murder delivered terrible damage to the soul. Of course, he had done this once before, in the name of another friend, and so in his mind he felt he could be no more lost than he already was.

Alas, that particular flavour of redress was not to be.

Troubled by a host of thoughts, Cutter approached the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. He noted an old carter leading an ox away, but had no reason to give it any further consideration. As soon as he walked inside, he sensed that something was wrong. Irilta was behind the bar with a bottle in her hand – not, he saw, to pour drinks for customers, but to lift it to her mouth, tilt it back and take punishing mouthfuls. Her eyes were red, startling in a pallid face.

Few people were speaking, and those who were did so in muted tones.

Meese was nowhere to be seen, but Cutter noticed Kruppe, sitting at his table with his back to the room – something he had never before seen him do. A dusty bottle of expensive wine was before him, four goblets set out. Kruppe was slowly filling the one opposite the chair on his right.

His unease deepening, Cutter walked over. He pulled out that chair and sat down.

There was no sign of Kruppe's usual affability in his visage. Grave, colourless, bleak. In his eyes, raw anguish. 'Drink, my young friend,' he said.

Cutter saw that the remaining two goblets were empty. He reached out. 'This is the expensive stuff, isn't it? What's happened, Kruppe?'

'Honourable Murillio is dead.'

The statement felt like a body blow, punching the breath from Cutter's chest. He could not move. Pain surged up through the numbness, sank down again only to return once more. Over and over again.

'A duel,' said Kruppe. 'He went to retrieve a lost child. The Eldra Mines west of the city.'

Something jerked inside Cutter, but he could make no sense of it. A recognition? Of what? 'I thought – I thought he'd given all that up.'

'Given what up, my friend? The desire to do right?'

Cutter shook his head. 'Duelling. I meant . . . duelling.'

'To effect the release of young Harllo. The mine's owner was there, or one of them at least. History comes round, as it is known to do.' Kruppe sighed. 'He was too old for such things.'

And now came the question, and it was asked in a dull tone, a voice emptied of everything. 'Who killed him, Kruppe?'

And the round man flinched, and hesitated.

'Kruppe.'

'This will not do—'

'Kruppe!'

'Ah, can such forces be resisted? Gorlas Vidikas.'

And that was that. He'd known, yes, Cutter had known.

The mine . . . Eldra . . . the history. *He knows about me. He wanted to punish me. He killed Murillio to hurt me. He killed a fine . . . a fine and noble man. This – this must stop.*

'Sit down, Cutter.'

*I mean to stop this. Now. It's what she wants, anyway.*

'Coll is coming,' Kruppe said. 'And Rallick Nom – Crokus, leave this to Rallick—'

But he was already moving, eyes on the door. Irilta stood watching and something in her face caught his attention. There was dark hunger in her eyes – as if she knew where he was going, as if she knew – 'Cutter,' she said in a rasp, 'get the bastard. *Get him.'*

And then he was outside. The day's brilliance was like a slap, rocking his head. He gasped, but breathing still wasn't easy. Pressures assailed him, and rage rose in his mind, a nightmare leviathan with gaping mouth, and its howl filled his skull.

Deafening Cutter to the world.

The day is stripped down, time itself torn away, the present expanding, swallowing everything in sight. It is an instant and that instant feels eternal.

Recall this day's beginning. A single breath, drawn in with love—

Bellam Nom took a length of braided hide, made loops at both ends. He crouched down in front of Mew. 'See this loop, Mew? Take it in your hands – I'm going to hold on to the other end, all right? We're going out. You just keep hold of the rope, all right?'

Round-eyed Mew nodded.

'Don't worry,' said Bellam, 'I'll walk slowly.' He then went to Hinty and picked the girl up, taking her weight in the crook of his left arm. Her thin arms wrapped about his neck and her wet nose brushed his cheek. Bellam smiled down at Mew. 'Ready?'

Another nod.

They set out.

Snell was still with the old bodymonger, and Bellam had no interest in retrieving him just yet. He had no idea what had happened to Myrla and Bedek, but he left a message scrawled out with charcoal on the surface of the lone table, telling them where he'd taken Mew and Hinty.

Murillio should have been back by now. Bellam was getting worried. He couldn't wait around any longer.

They walked slowly through the crowds. Twice Mew was inadvertently tugged loose from the rope, but both times Bellam was able to retrieve her. They left the unofficial neighbourhood slum known as the Trench and after some time they arrived at the duelling school.

Bellam set Hinty down in the warm-up area, instructed Mew to remain with her little sister, then set out to find Stonny Menackis.

She was sitting on a stone bench in the shade-swallowed colonnade running along the back end of the practice yard, her long legs stretched out, her eyes on nothing. When she heard him approach she glanced up. 'Classes cancelled. Go away.'

'I'm not here for any lessons,' Bellam said, surprised at the harsh judgement in his own voice.

'Get out,' she said, 'before I beat you senseless.'

'Too many people, Stonny, are stepping in for you, doing what you're supposed to be doing. It's not fair.'

She scowled. 'What are you talking about?'

'Murillio hasn't come back?'

'Everybody leaves.'

'He found Harllo.'

'What?'

He saw interest flaring to life in her dark eyes. 'He found him, Stonny. Working in a mining camp. He went to get him back. But he hasn't returned. Something's happened, something bad – I can feel it.'

She stood. 'Where is this camp? How did he end up there?'

'Snell.'

She stared. 'I'm going to kill that little bastard.'

'No, you're not. He's taken care of. We've got a new problem.'

At that moment a small figure stepped into the corridor, stared at them.

Stonny frowned. 'Mew? Where's your ma and da? Where's Hinty?'

Mew started crying, and then rushed towards Stonny who had no choice but to take the child into her arms.

'They've gone missing,' said Bellam. 'I was taking care of them, waiting, but they never showed up. Stonny, I don't know what to do with them. I need to get home – my own parents must be going crazy with worry.'

She spun round, still holding Mew, and her face was savage. 'I need to get Harllo! Take them to your home!'

'No. Enough of this. Take responsibility for them, Stonny. Once I let my parents know I'm all right, I'll go and find Murillio. Take responsibility. You owe it to Myrla and Bedek – they did it for you. For years.'

He thought she would strike him, saw the fury warring in her eyes. He stepped back. 'Hinty's in the warm-up, probably sleeping – she does that a lot. Oh, and they're hungry.'

He left them then.

It took the words of a young man – no, a boy – to do what Gruntle could not do. It took a barrage of blunt, honest words, smashing through, against which she had no real defence.

She stood, Mew in her arms, feeling as if her soul had been blasted open, and all that was left was a hollow shell, slowly refilling. Refilling with . . .

something. 'Oh,' she whispered, *'Harllo.'*

Shardan Lim was waiting for Challice when she returned home. He rose from the ornate bench but did not approach, instead standing, watching her with an odd expression.

'This,' she said, 'is unexpected.'

'No doubt. Forgive me for intruding on your . . . busy schedule.'

There was no genuine remorse to back his apology, however, and she felt a trembling of her nerves. 'What do you want, Councillor?'

'Are we not past titles, Challice?'

'That depends.'

'Perhaps you're right. Even so, after we're done here there'll be no need for formalities between us.'

Should she call for the guard? What would he do? *Why, he'd laugh.*

Shardan Lim walked closer. 'Pour yourself some wine.

Pour yourself a lot of wine, if you like. I must tell you, I am not at all pleased at having been so unceremoniously discarded. It seems you find adultery to your taste, and your appetite has grown. Out of control? I think, yes, out of control.'

'You forced open the door,' she said, 'and now complain that I've left the room?'

His thin colourless lips curved in a smile. 'Something like that. I'm not ready for you to leave just yet.'

'And I am to have no say in the matter?'

His brows lifted. 'Dear Challice. You surrendered such privileges long ago. You let your husband use you – not in any normal way, but still, you let him use you. You let me do the same, and now some lowborn thief, and who knows how many others. Make no protest now – it will sound hollow even to you, I'm sure.'

'It's still my life.' But the words sounded thin, too brittle to stretch very far over the misshapen, ugly truth.

He did not bother with a response, but looked across to a divan.

'You'll have to drag me,' she said, 'so the reality will be plain, so plain you won't be able to pretend this is anything but the rape it is.'

He looked disappointed. 'Wrong again, Challice. You are going to walk over there and undress. You are going to lie back and spread your legs. It should be easy now; you've done it often enough. Your lowborn lover is going to have to share you, I'm afraid. Before long, I expect you'll not even be able to tell the difference.'

How could he force her to do such things? She did not understand, although – without doubt – *he* did. Yes, Shardan Lim understood things far too well.

She walked to the divan.

She was still sore, achy, from the morning's lovemaking. Before long, that ache would be deeper, more raw than it was now. Pain and pleasure, yes, entwined like lovers. She could feed them both again and again, for ever and again.

And so she would. Until the time came when she . . . awakened.

*Crokus, never mind my husband. There is no point. I will tell you that the next time. I promise.*

*I promise.*

Shardan Lim used her then, but in the end it was he who did not understand. And when she thanked him afterwards, he seemed taken aback. As he hurried to dress and depart, she remained lying on the divan, amused at his confusion, at peace with the way of things now.

And she thought of her glass globe with its trapped moon, that gift of a youth long lost, and she smiled.

*

In a near tropical city, the dead are quickly dressed. A distraught Coll, half-mad with grief, arrived in a carriage. Meese came down from the room where she had sat with the body, and Coll sent one of his aides to crack open the family crypt. There would be no delays permitted. Grief was transformed into fury when Coll discovered who had been responsible for Murillio's death.

'First blood drawn's never enough for Vidikas. He likes killing – under any other circumstances he'd be on his way to the High Gallows. Damn these antiquated duelling laws. The time's come to outlaw duels – I will address the Council—'

'Such a thing will not pass,' Kruppe said, shaking his head. 'Coll knows this as well as does Kruppe.'

Coll stood like a man trapped, cornered. 'Where's Rallick?' he asked in a growl.

Sighing, Kruppe poured the second to last goblet full and handed it to Coll. 'He will be here soon, Kruppe believes. Such is this day, in no hurry to end, and will any of us sleep this night? Kruppe already dreads the impending solitude. Ah, here is Rallick.'

They watched as Irilta stumbled to the assassin, very nearly collapsing into Rallick's arms. His expression of shock quickly darkened as she spoke, her voice muffled since her face was pressed against his shoulder – but not so muffled that he did not comprehend.

His gaze lifted, met Kruppe's, and then Coll's.

There was no one else left in the bar – the poisoned atmosphere had driven away even the most insensate drinkers. Sulty and Chud the new cook stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen, Sulty quietly weeping.

Kruppe poured the last goblet and then sat down, his back to the scene. Coll slumped down beside Kruppe, draining down the wine with the practised ease of an alcoholic reacquainting himself with his deadly passion, but Kruppe had chosen this wine with such risks in mind – its headiness was an illusion, the taste of alcohol a clever combination of

spices and nothing more. This was, Kruppe understood, but a temporary solution. He knew Coll well, understood the self-serving cycle of self-pity that now loomed before the man, sauntering in wearing that familiar smirk, like an old, deadly lover. She would open wide her arms, now, to fold Coll in once more – the days and nights ahead would be difficult indeed.

After a long moment Rallick joined them, and although he remained standing he reached down for the goblet. 'Crokus should be here,' he said.

'He was, but he has left.'

Coll started. 'Left? Did Murillio mean so little to him that he'd just walk away?'

'He left,' said Kruppe, 'to find Gorlas Vidikas.'

Coll swore and rose. 'The fool – Vidikas will slice him to pieces! Rallick —'

And the assassin was already setting the goblet back down and turning away.

'Wait!' snapped Kruppe in a tone that neither man had ever heard before – not from Kruppe, at least. 'Both of you! Take up that wine again, Rallick.' And now he too rose. 'There is the memory of a friend and we will drink to it. Here, now. Rallick, you will not catch Crokus, you will not make it in time. Listen well to Kruppe, both of you. Vengeance need not be rushed—'

'So Rallick should just let Vidikas kill yet another friend of ours?'

Kruppe faced the assassin. 'Do you lack faith as well, Rallick Nom?'

'That is not the point,' the man replied.

'You cannot halt what has already happened. He has already walked this path. You discovered that, did you not? Outside this very inn.'

Coll rubbed at his face, as if waiting to find the numbness a bellyful of wine should have given him. 'Is Crokus truly—'

'He has a new name,' Rallick interrupted, finally nodding. 'One he has clearly earned the hard way.'

'Cutter, yes,' said Kruppe.

Coll looked back and forth between the two of them, and then thumped back down into his chair. All at once he looked a century old, shoulders folding in as he reached for the bottle and refilled his goblet. 'There will be repercussions. Vidikas is . . . not alone. Hanut Orr, Shardan Lim. Whatever happens is going to ripple outward – gods below, this could get messy.'

Rallick grunted. 'Hanut Orr and Shardan Lim. I can get in their way when the time comes.'

Coll's eyes flashed. 'You've got Cutter's back. Good. We can take care of this – you can, I mean. I'm useless – I always was.' He sank back, the chair creaking, and looked away. 'What's with this wine? It's doing nothing.'

'Murillio,' said Kruppe, 'would not be pleased at you standing drunk when his body is carried into the crypt. Honour him, Coll, now and from now on.'

'Fuck off,' he replied.

The back of Rallick Nom's gloved hand snapped hard against Coll's face, rocking him back. He surged upright, outraged, reaching for the ornate knife at his belt. The two men stood glaring at each other.

'Stop this!'

A bottle smashed against the floor, the contents spraying the feet of Coll and Rallick, and both turned as Meese snarled, 'There you go, Coll, lap it up and choke to death! In the meantime, how 'bout the rest of us pay our respects and walk him to the crypt – the undertaker's cart's arrived. It's time – not for any of you, but for him. For Murillio. You chew up this day and it'll haunt you for ever. And Hood's breath, so will I.'

Coll ducked his head and spat blood, and then said, 'Let's get this done, then. For Murillio.'

Rallick nodded.

Behind the bar, Irilta was suddenly sick. The sounds of her gagging and coughing silenced everyone else.

Coll looked shamefaced.

Kruppe rested a hand on the man's shoulder. And all at once the councillor was weeping, so broken that to bear witness was to break deep within oneself. Rallick turned away then, both hands lifting to his face.

Survivors do not mourn together. They each mourn alone, even when in the same place. Grief is the most solitary of all feelings. Grief isolates, and every ritual, every gesture, every embrace, is a hopeless effort to break through that isolation.

None of it works. The forms crumble and dissolve.

To face death is to stand alone.

How far can a lost soul travel? Picker believed she had begun in some distant frozen world, struggling thigh-deep through drifts of snow, a bitter wind howling round her. Again and again she fell, crusted ice scraping her flesh raw – for she was naked, her fingers blackening from the tips as they froze into solid, dead things. Her toes and then her feet did the same, the skin splitting, the ankles swelling.

Two wolves were on her trail. She did not know how she knew this, but she did. Two wolves. God and Goddess of War, the Wolves of Winter. They scented her as they would a rival – but she was no ascendant, and certainly no goddess. She had worn torcs once, sworn to Treach, and this now marked her.

War could not exist without rivals, without enemies, and this was as true in the immortal realm as it was in the mortal one. The pantheon ever reflects the nature of its countless aspects. The facets deliver unerring truths. In winter, war was the lifeless chill of dead flesh. In summer, war rotted in fetid, flyblown clouds. In autumn, the battlefield was strewn with the dead. In spring, war arose anew in the same fields, the seeds well nurtured in rich soil.

She fought through a dark forest of black spruce and firs. Her fingers dropped off one by one. She stumbled on stumps. The winter assailed her, the winter was her enemy, and the wolves drew ever closer.

Through a mountain pass, then; brief flashes of awareness and each time they arrived, lifting her out of oblivion, she found the landscape transformed. Heaped boulders, eskers, ragged peaks towering overhead. A tortured, twisted trail, suddenly pitching sharply downward, stunted pines and oaks to either side. Bestial howls voicing their rage high above, far behind her now.

A valley below, verdant and rank, a jungle nestled impossibly close to the high ranges and the whipping snow-sprayed winds – or perhaps she had traversed continents. Her hands were whole, her bare feet sinking into warm, wet loam. Insects spun and whirred about her.

From the thicket came an animal cough, a cat's heavy growl.

And another hunter had found her.

She hurried on, as if some other place awaited her, a sanctuary, a cave that she could enter, to emerge upon some other side, reborn. And now she saw, rising haphazardly from the moss and humus and mounds of rotted trunks, swords, blades encrusted, cross-hilts bedecked in moss, pommels green with verdigris. Swords of all styles, all so corroded and rusted that they would be useless as weapons.

She heard the cat's cough again, closer this time.

Panic flitted through her.

She found a clearing of high swaying grasses, a sea of emerald green that she plunged into, pushing her way across.

Something thrashed into her wake, a swift, deadly rush.

She screamed, fell to the ground.

Snapping, barking voices surrounded her, answered by a snarl from somewhere close behind her. Picker rolled on to her back. Human-like figures crowded her, baring their teeth and making stabbing gestures with fire-hardened spears towards a leopard crouched down not three paces from where she was lying. The beast's ears were flattened back, its eyes blazing. Then, in a flash, it was gone.

Picker pushed herself to her feet, and found that she towered over these people, and yet they were one and all adults – even through the fine pelt of hair covering them she could see that. Five females, four males, and the females were the more robust among them, with wide hips and deep ribcages.

Luminous brown eyes fixed upon her with something like worship, and then the spears were brought round and she was being prodded along, on to a trail cutting across the path she had been taking. *So much for worship.* Those spears threatened, and she saw something black smeared on the points. *I'm a prisoner. Terrific.*

They hurried down the trail, a trail never meant for one as tall as Picker, and she found branches scraping across her face again and again. Before long they reached another clearing, this one at the foot of a cliff. A wide, low rock shelf projected over a sloping cave-mouth from which drifted woodsmoke. Two ancients were squatting at the entrance, both women, with a gaggle of children staring out behind them.

There was none of the expected squealing excitement from the children – indeed, no sounds were uttered at all, and Picker felt a sudden suspicion: these creatures were not the masters of their domain. No, they behaved as would prey. She saw stones to either side of the cave, heaped up to be used to make a barricade come the dusk.

Her captors drove her into the cave. She was forced to bend over to keep from scraping her head on the pitched, blackened ceiling. The children fled to either side. Beyond the flickering light from the lone hearth the cave continued on into darkness. Coughing in the smoke, she stumbled forward, round the fire, and into the depths. The shafts of the spears urged her on. The floor of packed earth beneath her feet was free of rubble, but the slope was getting ever steeper and she felt herself sliding, losing purchase.

Suddenly the shafts pressed hard against her and shoved.

Shouting in alarm, Picker pitched forward, slid on the damp floor as if it was layered in grease. She fought to grasp hold of something, but nothing

touched her flailing hands – and then the floor vanished beneath her, and she was falling.

Harllo's sudden unexpected plummet ended quickly amidst sharp-edged boulders. Gashes ripped across his back, one thigh and the ankle of the same leg. The impact left him stunned. He vaguely heard something strike the rocks nearby, a terrible snapping, crunching sound.

Eventually, he stirred. The pain from the wounds was fierce, and he could feel blood trickling down, but it seemed he'd broken no bones. He crawled slowly to where he'd heard Bainisk land, and heard ragged breathing.

When his probing hands touched warm flesh, he found it wet, broken. And at the brush of his fingertips it flinched away.

'Bainisk!'

A low groan, and then a gasp.

'Bainisk, it's me. We made it down – we got away.'

'Harllo?' The voice was awful in its weakness, its pain.

'Tell me . . .'

He pulled himself up alongside Bainisk, his eyes making out a rough shape. He found Bainisk's face, tilted towards him, and Harllo drew himself on to his knees and eased up his friend's head – feeling strange shards moving under his hands, beneath Bainisk's blood-matted hair – and then, as gently as he could manage, he settled the head on to his lap.

'Bainisk.'

The face was crushed along one side. It was a miracle that he could speak at all. 'I dreamed,' he whispered. 'I dreamed of the city. Floating on the lake . . . going wherever the waves go. Tell me, Harllo, tell me about the city.'

'You'll see it soon enough—'

'Tell me.'

Harllo stroked his friend's brow. 'In the city . . . Bainisk, oh, in the city, there's shops and everybody has all the money they need and you can buy whatever you want. There's gold and silver, beautiful silver, and the people are happy to give it away to anyone they like. No one ever argues about anything – why should they? There's no hunger, no hurts, no hurts of any kind, Bainisk. In the city every child has a mother and a father . . . and the mother loves her son for ever and ever and the father doesn't rape her. And you can just pick them for yourself. A beautiful mother, a strong, handsome father – they'd be so happy to take care of you – you'll see, you'll see.

'They'd see how good you are. They'd see right through to your heart, and see it pure and golden, because all you ever wanted to do was to help out, because you were a burden to them and you didn't want that, and maybe if you helped enough they'd love you, and want you to be with them, to live with them. And when it didn't work, well, it just means you have to work harder. Do more, do everything.

'Oh, Bainisk, the city . . . there are mothers . . .'

He stopped then, for Bainisk had stopped breathing. He was perfectly still, his whole broken-up body folded over the sharp rocks, his head so heavy in Harllo's lap.

Leave them there, now.

The city, ah, the city. As dusk closes in, the blue fires awaken. Figures stand in a cemetery surrounded by squat Daru crypts, and they are silent as they watch the workers sealing the door once more. Starlings flit overhead.

Down at the harbour a woman steps lithely on to the dock and breathes deep the squalid air, and then sets out to find her sister.

Scorch and Leff stand nervously at the gate of an estate. They're not talking much these nights. Within the compound, Torvald Nom paces. He is not sure if he should go home. The night has begun strange, heavy, and his nerves are a mess. Madrun and Lazan Door are throwing knuckles against a wall, while Studious Lock stands on a balcony, watching.

Challice Vidikas sits in her bedroom, holding a glass globe and staring at the trapped moon within its crystal clear sphere.

In a room above a bar Blend sits beside the motionless form of her lover, and weeps.

Below, Duiker slowly looks up as Fisher, cradling a lute, begins a song.

In the Phoenix Inn, an old, worn-out woman, head pounding, shambles to her small cubicle and sinks down on to the bed. There were loves in the world that never found voice. There were secrets never unveiled, and what would have been the point of that? She was no languid beauty. She was no genius wit. Courage failed her again and again, but not this time, as she drew sharp blades lengthways up her wrists, at precise angles, and watched as life flowed away. In Irilta's mind, this last gesture was but a formality.

Passing through Two-Ox Gate, Bellam Nom sets out on the road. From a hovel among the lepers he hears someone softly sobbing. The wind has died, the smell of rotting flesh hangs thick and motionless. He hurries on, as the young are wont to do.

Much farther down the road, Cutter rides on a horse stolen from Coll's stable. His chest is filled with ashes, his heart a cold stone buried deep.

He drew a breath, sometime earlier that day, filled with love.

And then released it, black with grief.

Both seem to be gone now, vanished within him, perhaps never to return. And yet, hovering there before his mind's eye, he sees a woman.

Ghostly, wrapped in black, dark eyes fixed upon his own.

*Not this path, my love*.

He shakes his head at her words. Shakes his head.

*Not my path, my love.* But he rides on.

*I will give you my breath, my love. To hold.*

*Hold it for me, as I hold yours. Turn back.*

Cutter shakes his head again. 'You left me.'

*No, I gave you a choice, and the choice remains. My love, I gave you a place to come to, when you are ready. Find me. Come find me.*

'This first.'

*Take my breath. But not this one, not this one.*

'Too late, Apsalar. It was always too late.'

The soul knows no greater anguish than to take a breath that begins with love and ends with grief. But there are other anguishes, many others. They unfold as they will, and to dwell within them is to understand nothing.

Except, perhaps, this. In love, grief is a promise. As sure as Hood's nod. There will be many gardens, but this last one to visit is so very still. Not meant for lovers. Not meant for dreamers. Meant only for a single figure, there in the dark, standing alone.

Taking a single breath.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

In hollow grove and steeple chamber
The vine retreats and moss rolls inside
The void from whence it came
In shallow grave and cloven crypt
The bones shiver and shades flee
Into the spaces between breaths
In tilted tower and webslung doorway
Echoes still and whispers will die
Men in masks rap knuckles 'gainst walls
In dark cabinets and beneath bed slats
Puppets clack limbs and painted eyes widen
To the song pouring down from hills
And the soul starts in its cavern drum
Battered and blunted to infernal fright
This is the music of the beast
The clamour of the world at bay
Begun its mad savage charge
The hunt commences my friends
The Hounds are among us.

*Prelude*
*Toll the Hounds*
Fisher

Faces of stone, and not one would turn Nimander's way. His grief was too cold for them, too strange. He had not shown enough shock, horror, dismay. He had taken the news of her death as would a commander hearing of the loss of a soldier, and only Aranatha – in the single, brief moment when she acknowledged anyone or anything – had but nodded in his direction, as if in grim approval.

Skintick's features were tight with betrayal, once the stunned disbelief wore off, and the closeness he had always felt with Nimander now seemed to have suddenly widened into a chasm no bridge could span. Nenanda had gone so far as to half draw his sword, yet was torn as to who most deserved his blade's bite: Clip or Nimander. Clip for his shrug, after showing them the crumbled edge of the cliff where she must have lost her footing. Or Nimander, who stood dry-eyed and said nothing. Desra, calculating, selfish Desra, was the first to weep.

Skintick expressed the desire to climb down into the crevasse, but this was a sentimental gesture he had drawn from his time among humans – the need to observe the dead, perhaps even to bury Kedeviss's body beneath boulders – and his suggestion was met with silence. The Tiste Andii held no regard for corpses. There would be no return to Mother Dark, after all. The soul was flung away, to wander for ever lost.

They set out shortly thereafter, Clip in the lead, continuing on through the rough pass. Clouds swept down the flanks of the peaks, as if the mountains were shedding their mantles of white, and before long the air grew cold and damp, thin in their lungs, and all at once the clouds swallowed the world.

Stumbling on the slick, icy stone, Nimander trudged on in Clip's wake – although the warrior was no longer even visible, there was only one possible path. He could feel judgement hardening upon his back, an ever thickening succession of layers, from Desra, from Nenanda, and most painfully from Skintick, and it seemed the burdens would never relent. He longed for Aranatha to speak up, to whisper the truth to them all, but she was silent as a ghost.

They were now all in grave danger. They needed to be warned, but Nimander could guess the consequences of such a revelation. Blood would spill, and he could not be certain that it would be Clip's. Not now, not when Clip could unleash the wrath of a god – or whatever it was that possessed the warrior.

Kedeviss had brought to him her suspicions down in the village beside the lakebed, giving firm shape to what he had already begun to believe. Clip had awakened but at a distance, as if behind a veil. Oh, he had always shown his contempt for Nimander and the others, but this was different. Something fundamental had changed. The new contempt now hinted of hunger, avarice, as if Clip saw them as nothing more than raw meat, awaiting the flames of his need.

Yet Nimander understood that Clip would only turn upon them if cornered, if confronted. As Kedeviss had done – even when Nimander had warned her against such a scene. No, Clip still needed them. *His way in.* As for what would happen then, not even the gods knew. Lord Anomander Rake did not suffer upstarts. He was never slowed by indecisiveness, and in delivering mercy even the cruellest miser could not match his constraint. And as for Clip's claim to be some sort of emissary from Mother Dark, well, that had become almost irrelevant, unless the god within the warrior was seeking to usurp Mother Dark herself.

This notion disturbed Nimander. The goddess was, after all, turned away. Her leaving had left a void. Could something as alien as the Dying God assume the Unseen Crown? Who would even kneel before such an entity?

It was hard to imagine Anomander Rake doing so, or any of the other Tiste Andii that Nimander and his kin had known. Obedience had never been deemed a pure virtue among the Tiste Andii. To follow must be an act born of deliberation, of clear-eyed, cogent recognition that the one to be followed has earned the privilege. So often, after all, formal structures of hierarchy stood in place of such personal traits and judgements. A title or rank did not automatically confer upon the one wearing it any true virtue, or even worthiness to the claim.

Nimander had seen for himself the flaws inherent in that hierarchy. Among the Malazans, the renegade army known as the Bonehunters, there had been officers Nimander would not follow under any circumstances. Men and women of incompetence – oh, he'd seen how such fools were usually weeded out, through the informal justice system practised by the common soldier, a process often punctuated by a knife in the back, which struck Nimander as a most dangerous habit. But these were human ways, not those of the Tiste Andii.

If Clip and the Dying God that possessed him truly believed they could usurp Mother Dark, and indeed her chosen son, Anomander Rake, as ruler of the Tiste Andii, then that conceit was doomed. And yet, he could not but recall the poisonous lure of saemankelyk. There could be other paths to willing obedience.

*And that is why I can say nothing. Why Aranatha is right. We must lull Clip into disregarding us, so that he continues believing we are fools. Because there is the chance, when the moment arrives, that I alone will be standing close enough. To strike. To catch him – them – unawares.*

*It may be that Anomander Rake and the others in Black Coral will have nothing to fear from Clip, from the Dying God. It may be that they will swat them down with ease.*

*But we cannot be sure of that.*

*In truth, I am afraid . . .*

'I can see water.'

Startled, Nimander glanced back at Skintick, but his cousin would not meet his eyes.

'Where the valley dips down, eastward – I think that is the Cut that Clip described. And along the north shore of it, we will find Black Coral.'

Clip had halted on an outcropping and was staring down into the misty valley. They had left most of the cloud in their wake, descending beneath its ceiling. Most of the range was now on their left, westward, the nearest cliff-

face grey and black and broken only by a dozen or so mountain sheep wending their way along a seam.

Skintick called out to the warrior, 'That looks to be a long swim across, Clip.'

The man turned, rings spinning on their chain. 'We will find a way,' he said. 'Now, we should continue on, before it gets too dark.'

'What is your hurry?' Skintick asked. 'The entire trail down is bound to be treacherous, especially in this half-light. What would be the point in taking a tumble and . . .' Skintick went no further.

*And breaking a neck.*

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, only the clack of the rings carried on, like a man chewing stones.

After a moment, Clip stepped back from the ledge and set out down the path once more.

Nimander made to follow but Skintick grasped his arm, forcing him round.

'Enough,' Skintick growled, and Nenanda moved up beside him, Desra joining them. 'We want to know what's going on, Nimander.'

Nenanda spoke. 'She didn't just fall – do you think we're fools, Nimander?'

'Not fools,' he replied, and then hesitated, 'but you must play at being fools . . . for a little longer.'

'He killed her, didn't he?'

At Skintick's question Nimander forced himself to lock gazes with his cousin, but he said nothing.

Nenanda gave a sudden hiss and whirled to glare at Aranatha, who stood nearby. 'You must have sensed something!'

Her brows arched. 'Why do you say that?'

He seemed moments from closing on her with a hand upraised, but she too did not flinch, and after a moment a look of sheer helplessness crumpled Nenanda's face and he turned from them all.

'He's not what he was,' said Desra. 'I've felt it – he's . . . uninterested.'

Of course she was speaking of Clip. Indeed they were not fools, none of them. Still Nimander said nothing. Still he waited.

Skintick could no longer hold Nimander's gaze. He glanced briefly at Desra and then stepped back. 'Fools, you said. We must play at being fools.'

Nenanda faced them once more. 'What does he want with us? What did he ever want? Dragging us along as if we were but his pets.' His eyes fixed on Desra. 'Flinging you on your back every now and then to keep the boredom away – and now you're saying what? Only that he's become bored by the distraction. Well.'

She gave no sign that his words wounded her. 'Ever since he awakened,' she said. 'I don't think boredom is a problem for him, not any more. And that doesn't make sense.'

'Because,' added Skintick, 'he's still contemptuous of us. Yes, I see your point, Desra.'

'Then what does he want with us?' Nenanda demanded again. 'Why does he still need us at all?'

'Maybe he doesn't,' said Skintick.

Silence.

Nimander finally spoke. 'She made a mistake.'

'Confronted him.'

'Yes.' He stepped away from Skintick, setting his gaze upon the descent awaiting them. 'My authority holds no weight,' he said. 'I told her to stay away – to leave it alone.'

'Leave it to Anomander Rake, you mean.'

He faced Skintick again. 'No. That is too much of an unknown. We – we don't know the situation in Black Coral. If they're . . . vulnerable. We don't know anything of that. It'd be dangerous to assume someone else can fix all this.'

They were all watching him now.

'Nothing has changed,' he said. 'If he gets even so much as a hint – it must be us to act first. We choose the ground, the right moment. Nothing has changed – do you all understand me?'

Nods. And odd, disquieting expressions on every face but Aranatha's – he could not read them. 'Am I not clear enough?'

Skintick blinked, as if surprised. 'You are perfectly clear, Nimander. We should get moving, don't you think?'

*What – what has just happened here?* But he had no answers. Uneasy, he moved out on to the trail.

The rest fell in behind him.

Nenanda drew Skintick back, slowing their progress, and hissed, 'How, Skin? How did he do that? We were there, about to – I don't know – and then, all of a sudden, he just, he just—'

'Took us into his hands once more, yes.'

'How?'

Skintick simply shook his head. He did not think he could find the right words – not for Nenanda, not for the others. *He leads. In the ways of leading, the ways the rest of us do not – and can never – understand.*

*I looked into his eyes, and I saw such resolve that I could not speak.*

*Absence of doubt? No, nothing so egotistic as that. Nimander has plenty of doubts, so many that he's lost his fear of them. He accepts them as easily as anything else. Is that the secret? Is that the very definition of greatness?*

*He leads. We follow – he took us into his hands, again, and each one of us stood, silent, finding in ourselves what he had just given us – that resolve,*

*the will to go on – and it left us humbled.*

*Oh, do I make too much of this? Are we all no more than children, and these the silly, meaningless games of children?*

'He killed Kedeviss,' muttered Nenanda.

'Yes.'

'And Nimander will give answer to that.'

*Yes.*

Monkrat squatted in the mud and watched the line of new pilgrims edge closer to the camp. Most of their attention, at least to begin with, had been on the barrow itself – on that emperor's ransom of wasted wealth – but now, as they approached the decrepit ruin, he could see how they hesitated, as something of the wrongness whispered through. Most were rain-soaked, senses dulled by long, miserable journeys. It would take a lot to stir their unease.

He watched the sharpening of their attention, as details resolved from the gloom, the mists and the woodsmoke. The corpse of the child in the ditch, the rotting swaths of clothes, the broken cradle with four crows crowding the rail, looming over the motionless, swaddled bundle. The weeds now growing up on the path leading to and from the barrow. Things were not as they should be.

Some might beat a quick retreat. Those with a healthy fear of corruption. But so many pilgrims came with the desperate hunger that was spiritual need – it was what made them pilgrims in the first place. They were lost and they wanted to be found. How many would resist that first cup of kelyk, the drink that welcomed, the nectar that stole . . . everything?

Perhaps more than among those who had come before – as they saw the growing signs of degradation, of abandonment of all those qualities of humanity the Redeemer himself honoured. Monkrat watched them hesitate, even as the least broken of the kelykan shuffled into their midst, each offering up a jug of the foul poison.

'The Redeemer has drunk deep!' they murmured again and again.

Well, not yet. But that time was coming, of that Monkrat had little doubt. At which point . . . he shifted about slightly and lifted his gaze to the tall, narrow tower rising into the dark mists above the city. No, he couldn't make her out from here, not with this sullen weather sinking down, but he could feel her eyes – eternally open. Oh, he knew that damned dragon of old, could well recall his terror as the creature sailed above the treetops in Blackdog and Mott Wood, the devastation of her attacks. If the Redeemer fell, *she* would assail the camp, the barrow, everything and everyone. There would be fire, a fire that needed no fuel, yet devoured all.

And then Anomander Rake himself would arrive, striding through the wreckage with black sword in his hands, to take the life of a god – whatever life happened to be left.

Shivering in the damp, he rose, pulling his tattered raincape about him. Gradithan was probably looking for him, wanting to know what Monkrat's countless sets of eyes in the city might have seen – not that there was much to report. The Tiste Andii weren't up to much, but then they never were, until such time as necessity stirred them awake. Besides, he'd woken up with a headache, a dull throb just behind the eyes – it was the weather, pressure building in his sinuses. And even the rats in the camp were proving elusive, strangely nervous, skittish when he sought to snare them to his will.

He wasn't interested in seeing Gradithan. The man had moved from opportunist to fanatic alarmingly fast, and while Monkrat had no problem understanding the former, he was baffled by the latter. And frightened.

The best way to avoid Gradithan was to wander down into Black Coral. The blessing of darkness was far too bitter for the worshippers of saemankelyk.

He worked his way into the ankle-deep river of mud that was the trail leading into Night.

From somewhere nearby a cat suddenly yowled and Monkrat started as he sensed a wave of panic sweep through every rat within hearing. Shaking himself, he continued on.

A moment later he realized someone was walking behind him – a pilgrim, perhaps, smart enough to elect to avoid the camp, someone now looking for an inn, all thoughts of salvation riding the tide out in waves of revulsion.

*'No believer should arrive willing*.' So said that High Priestess, Salind, before Gradithan destroyed her. Monkrat recalled being confused by that statement back then. Now, he wasn't. Now, he understood precisely what she'd meant. Worship born of need could not but be suspect, fashioned from self-serving motives as it was. *'Someone wanting their bowl filled will take whatever is poured into it*.' No, revelation could not be sought, not through willing deprivation or meditation. It needed to arrive unexpected, even undesired. *'Do not trust an easy believer*.' Aye, she'd been a strange High Priestess, all right.

He remembered one night, when—

A knife edge pressed cold against his throat.

'Not a move,' hissed a voice behind him, and it was a moment before Monkrat realized that the words had been spoken in Malazan.

'Figured I wouldn't recognize you, soldier?'

Cold sweat cut through the steamy heat beneath his woollen clothes. His breath came in gasps. 'Hood's breath, if you're gonna kill me just get it done with!'

'I'm sore tempted, I am.'

'Fine, do it then – I've got a curse ready for you—'

The Malazan snorted, and dogs started barking. 'That'd be a real mistake.'

Monkrat's headache had redoubled. He felt something trickling down from his nostrils. The air was rank with a stench he struggled to identify. Bestial, like an animal's soaked pelt. 'Gods below,' he groaned. 'Spindle.'

'Aye, my fame precedes me. Sorry I can't recall your name, or your squad, even. But you were a Bridgeburner – that much I do remember. Vanished up north, listed as dead – but no, you deserted, ran out on your squadmates.'

'What squadmates? They were all killed. My friends, all killed. I'd had enough, Spindle. We were getting chewed to pieces in that swamp. Aye, I walked. Would it have been better if I'd stayed, only to die here in Black Coral?'

'Not everyone died here, soldier—'

'That's not what I heard. The Bridgeburners are done, finished.'

After a moment the knife fell away.

Monkrat spun round, stared at the short, bald man, wearing that infamous hairshirt – and Hood's breath, *it stank*. 'Which has me wondering – what are you doing here? Alive? Out of uniform?'

'Dujek looked at us – a handful left – and just went and added our names to the list. He sent us on our way.'

'And you—'

'I decided on the pilgrimage. The Redeemer – I saw Itkovian myself, you see. And I saw Capustan. I was here when the barrow went up – there's a sharper of mine in that heap, in fact.'

'A *sharper*?'

Spindle scowled. 'You had to have been there, soldier.'

'Monkrat. That's my name now.'

'Wipe the blood from your nose, Monkrat.'

'Listen, Spindle – hear me well – you want nothing to do with the Redeemer. Not now. You didn't kill me, so I give you that – my warning. Run, run fast. As far away from here as you can.' He paused. 'Where'd you come from anyway?'

'Darujhistan. It's where we settled. Me and Antsy, Bluepearl, Picker, Blend, Captain Paran. Oh, and Duiker.'

'Duiker?'

'The Imperial Historian—'

'I know who he is – was – whatever. It's just, that don't fit, him being there, I mean.'

'Aye, he didn't fit well at all. He was on the Chain of Dogs.'

Monkrat made a gesture. Fener's blessing.

Spindle's eyes widened. He sheathed his knife. 'I've worked up a thirst, Monkrat.'

'Not for kelyk, I hope.'

'That shit they tried to force on me back there? Smelled like puke. No, I want beer. Ale. Wine.'

'We can find that in Black Coral.'

'And you can tell me what's happened – to the Redeemer.'

Monkrat rubbed at the bristle on his chin, and then nodded. 'Aye, I will.' He paused. 'Hey, you remember the red dragon? From Blackdog?'

'Aye.'

'She's here – and when it gets bad enough with the Redeemer, well, she'll spread her wings.'

'No wonder I got so edgy when I arrived. Where's she hiding, then?'

Monkrat grimaced. 'In plain sight. Come on, see for yourself.'

The two ex-soldiers set out for Black Coral.

The clouds closed in, thick as curtains of sodden sand. In the camp, new dancers spun and whirled through the detritus, while a handful of terrified pilgrims fled back up the trail.

Rain arrived in a torrent, the water rushing down the flanks of the barrow, making it glisten and gleam until it seemed it was in motion. Shivering, moments from splitting wide open. From the clouds, thunder rattled like ironshod spears, a strange, startling sound that drew denizens of Black Coral out into the streets, to stare upward in wonder.

The water in the black bowls surrounding the High Priestess trembled in answer to that reverberation. She frowned as a wave of trepidation rolled through her. The time was coming, she realized. She was not ready, but then, for some things, one could never be ready. The mind worked possibilities, countless variations, in a procession that did nothing but measure the time wasted in waiting. And leave one exhausted, even less prepared than would have been the case if, for example, she had spent that period in an orgy of hedonistic abandon.

Well, too late for regrets – she shook her head. *Oh, it's never too late for regrets. That's what regrets are all about, you silly woman.* She rose from the cushion and spent a moment shaking out the creases in her robe. Should she track down Endest Silann?

Another heavy clatter of thunder.

Of course he felt it, too, that old priest, the deathly charge growing ever tauter – he didn't need her to remind him, rushing in all hysterical foam to gush round the poor man's ankles. The absurd image made her smile, but it was a wry smile, almost bitter. She had worked hard at affecting the cool repose so essential to the role of High Priestess, a repose easily mistaken for wisdom. But how could a woman in her position truly possess wisdom, when the very goddess she served had rejected her and all that she stood for? Not wisdom, but futility. Persistent, stubborn futility. If anything, what she represented was a failure of the intellect, and an even graver one of the spirit. Her worship was founded on denial, and in the absence of a true relationship with her goddess, she – like all those who had come before her – was free to invent every detail of that mock relationship.

The lie of wisdom is best hidden in monologue. Dialogue exposes it. Most people purporting to wisdom dare not engage in dialogue, lest they reveal the paucity of their assumptions and the frailty of their convictions. Better to say nothing, to nod and look thoughtful.

Was that notion worth a treatise? Yet another self-indulgent meander for the hall of scrolls? How many thoughts could one explore? Discuss, weigh, cast and count? *All indulgences. The woman looking for the next meal for her child has no time for such things. The warrior shoulder to shoulder in a*

*line facing an enemy can only curse the so-called wisdom that led him to that place. The flurry of kings and their avaricious terrors. The brutal solidity of slights and insults, grievances and disputes. Does it come down to who will eat and who will not? Or does it come down to who will control the option? The king's privilege in deciding who eats and who starves, privilege that is the taste of power, its very essence, in fact?*

*Are gods and goddesses any different?*

To that question, she knew Anomander Rake would but smile. He would speak of Mother Dark and the necessity of every decision she made – even down to the last one of turning away from her children. And he would not even blink when stating that his betrayal had forced upon her that final necessity.

She would walk away then, troubled, until some stretch of time later, when, in the solitude of her thoughts, she would realize that, in describing the necessities binding Mother Dark, he was also describing his very own necessities – all that had bound him to his own choices.

His betrayal of Mother Dark, she would comprehend – with deathly chill – had been *necessary.*

In Rake's mind, at any rate. And everything had simply followed on from there, inevitably, inexorably.

She could hear the rain lashing down on the temple's domed roof, harsh as arrows on upraised shields. The sky was locked in convulsions, a convergence of inimical elements. A narrow door to her left opened and one of her priestesses hurried in, then abruptly halted to bow. 'High Priestess.'

'Such haste,' she murmured in reply, 'so unusual for the temple historian.'

The woman glanced up, and her eyes were impressively steady. 'A question, if I may.'

'Of course.'

'High Priestess, are we now at war?'

'My sweetness – old friend – you have no idea.'

The eyes widened slightly, and then she bowed a second time. 'Will you summon Feral, High Priestess?'

'That dour creature? No, let the assassin stay in her tower. Leave her to lurk or whatever it is she does to occupy her time.'

'Spinnock Durav—'

'Is not here, I know that. I know that.' The High Priestess hesitated, and then said, 'We are now at war, as you have surmised. On countless fronts, only one of which – the one here – concerns us, at least for the moment. I do not think weapons need be drawn, however.'

'High Priestess, shall we prevail?'

'How should I know?' Those words snapped out, to her instant regret as she saw her old friend's gaze harden. 'The risk,' she said, in a quieter tone, 'is the gravest we have faced since . . . well, since Kharkanas.'

That shocked the temple historian – when nothing else had, thus far. But she recovered and, drawing a deep breath, said, 'Then I must invoke my role, High Priestess. Tell me what must be told. All of it.'

'For posterity?'

'Is that not my responsibility?'

'And if there will be no posterity? None to consider it, naught but ashes in the present and oblivion in place of a future? Will you sit scribbling until your last moment of existence?'

She was truly shaken now. 'What else would you have me do?'

'I don't know. Go find a man. Make fearful love.'

'I must know what has befallen us. I must know why our Lord sent away our greatest warrior, and then himself left us.'

'Countless fronts, this war. As I have said. I can tell you intent – as I understand it, and let me be plain, I may well not understand it at all – but not result, for each outcome is unknown. And each must succeed.'

'No room for failure?'

'None.'

'And if one should fail?'

'Then all shall fail.'

'And if that happens . . . ashes, oblivion – that will be our fate.'

The High Priestess turned away. 'Not just ours, alas.'

Behind her, the historian gasped.

On all sides, water trembled in bowls, and the time for the luxurious consideration of possibilities was fast fading.

Probably just as well.

'Tell me of redemption.'

'There is little that I can say, Segda Travos.'

Seerdomin snorted. 'The god known as the Redeemer can say nothing of redemption.' He gestured to that distant quiescent figure kneeling in the basin. 'She gathers power – I can smell it. Like the rot of ten thousand souls. What manner of god does she now serve? Is this the Fallen One? The Crippled God?'

'No, although certain themes are intertwined. For followers of the Crippled God, the flaw is the virtue. Salvation arrives with death, and it is purchased through mortal suffering. There is no perfection of the spirit to strive towards, no true blessing to be gained as a reward for faith.'

'And this one?'

'As murky as the kelyk itself. The blessing is surrender, the casting away of all thought. The self vanishes within the dance. The dream is shared by all who partake of pain's nectar, but it is a dream of oblivion. In a sense, the faith is anti-life. Not in the manner of death, however. If one views life as a struggle doomed to fail, then it is the failing that becomes the essence of worship. He is the Dying God, after all.'

'They celebrate the act of dying?'

'In a manner, yes, assuming you can call it celebration. More like enslavement. Worship as self-destruction, perhaps, in which all choice is lost.'

'And how can such a thing salve the mortal soul, Redeemer?'

'That I cannot answer. But it may be that we shall soon find out.'

'You do not believe I can protect you – at least in that we're in agreement. So, when I fall – when I fail – the Dying God shall embrace me as it will you.' He shook his head. 'I am not unduly worried about me. I fear more the notion of what eternal dying can do to redemption – that seems a most unholy union.'

The Redeemer simply nodded and it occurred to Seerdomin that the god had probably been thinking of little else. A future that seemed sealed into fate, an end to what was, and nothing glorious in what would follow.

He rubbed at his face, vaguely dismayed at the weariness he felt. Here, disconnected from his body, from any real flesh and bone, it was his spirit that was exhausted, battered down. And yet . . . *and yet, I will stand. And do all I can. To defend a god I have chosen not to worship, against a woman who dreamt once of his embrace, and dreams of the same now – with far deadlier intent.* He squinted down at her, a form almost shapeless in the gathering gloom beneath gravid, leaden clouds.

After a moment raindrops splashed against his helm, stained his forearms and his hands. He lifted one hand, and saw that the rain was black, thick, wending like slime.

The sky was raining kelyk.

She raised her head, and the distance between them seemed to vanish. Her eyes shone with fire, a slow, terrible pulse.

*Gods below . . .*

Like the worn ridge of a toothless jaw, the Gadrobi Hills rose into view, spanning the north horizon. Kallor halted to study them. An end to this

damned plain, to this pointless sweep of grasses. And there, to the northwest, where the hills sank back down, there was a city.

He could not yet see it. Soon.

The temple would be nondescript, the throne within it a paltry thing, poorly made, an icon of insipid flaws. A broken fool once named Munug would writhe before it, in obeisance, the High Priest of Pathos, the Prophet of Failure – enough thematic unity, in fact, to give any king pause. Kallor allowed himself a faint smirk. Yes, he was worthy of such worship, and if in the end he wrested it body and soul from the Crippled God, so be it.

The temple his domain, the score of bent and maimed priests and priestesses his court, the milling mob outside, sharing nothing but chronic ill luck, his subjects. This, he decided, had the makings of an immortal empire.

Patience – it would not do, he realized, to seek to steal the Fallen One's worshippers. There was no real need. The gods were already assembling to crush the Crippled fool once and for all. Kallor did not think they would fail this time. Though no doubt the Fallen One had a few more tricks up his rotted sleeve, not least the inherent power of the cult itself, feeding as it did on misery and suffering – two conditions of humanity that would persist for as long as humans existed.

Kallor grunted. 'Ah, fuck patience. The High King will take this throne. Then we can begin the . . . negotiations.'

He was no diplomat and had no interest in acquiring a diplomat's skills, not even when facing a god. There would be conditions, some of them unpalatable, enough to make the hoary bastard choke on his smoke. Well, too bad.

One more throne. The last he'd ever need.

He resumed walking. Boots worn through. Dust wind-driven into every crease of his face, the pores of his nose and brow, his eyes thinned to slits. The world clawed at him, but he pushed through. Always did. Always would.

One more throne. Darujhistan.

Long ago, in some long lost epoch, people had gathered on this blasted ridge overlooking the flattened valley floor, and had raised the enormous standing stones that now leaned in an uneven line spanning a thousand paces or more. A few had toppled here and there, but among the others Samar Dev sensed a belligerent vitality. As if the stones were determined to stand sentinel for ever, even as the bones of those who'd raised them now speckled the dust that periodically scoured their faces.

She paused to wipe sweat from her forehead, watching as Traveller reached the crest, and then moved off into the shade of the nearest stone, a massive phallic menhir looming tall, where he leaned against it with crossed arms. To await her, of course – she was clearly slowing them down, and this detail irritated her. What she lacked, she understood, was manic obsession, while her companions were driven and this lent them the vigour common to madmen. Which, she had long since decided, was precisely what they were.

She missed her horse, the one creature on this journey that she had come to feel an affinity with. An average beast, a simple beast, normal, mortal, sweetly dull-eyed and pleased by gestures of care and affection.

Resuming her climb, she struggled against the crumbled slope, forcing her legs between the sage brushes – too weary to worry about slumbering snakes and scorpions, or hairy spiders among the gnarled, twisted branches.

The thump of Havok's hoofs drummed through the ground, halting directly above her at the top of the slope. Scowling, she looked up.

Karsa's regard was as unreadable as ever, the shattered tattoo like a web stretching to the thrust of the face behind it. He leaned forward on his mount's neck and said, 'Do we not feed you enough?'

'Hood take you.'

'Why will you not accept sharing Havok's back, witch?'

Since he showed no inclination to move, she was forced to work to one side as she reached the crest, using the sage branches to pull herself on to

the summit. Where she paused, breathing hard, and then she held up her hands to her face, drawing in the sweet scent of the sage. After a moment she glanced up at the Toblakai. A number of responses occurred to her, in a succession of escalating viciousness. Instead of voicing any of them, she sighed and turned away, finding her own standing stone to lean against – noting, with little interest, that Traveller had lowered his head and seemed to be muttering quietly to himself.

This close to the grey schist, she saw that patterns had been carved into its surface, wending round milky nodules of quartz. With every dawn, she realized, this side of the stone would seem to writhe as the sun climbed higher, the nodes glistening. And the purpose of all that effort? Not even the gods knew, she suspected.

History, she realized, was mostly lost. No matter how diligent the recorders, the witnesses, the researchers, most of the past simply no longer existed. Would never be known. The notion seemed to empty her out somewhere deep inside, as if the very knowledge of loss somehow released a torrent of extinction within her own memories – moments swirling away, never to be retrieved. She set a finger in one groove etched into the stone, followed its serpentine track downward as far as she could reach, then back up again. The first to do so in how long?

*Repeat the old pattern – ignorance matters not – just repeat it, and so prove continuity.*

*Which in turn proves what?*

*That in living, one recounts the lives of all those long gone, long dead, even forgotten. Recounts all the demands of necessity – to eat, sleep, make love, sicken, fade into death – and the urges of blessed wonder – a finger tracking the serpent's path, a breath against stone. Weight and presence and the lure of meaning and pattern.*

*By this we prove the existence of the ancestors. That they once were, and that one day we will be the same. I, Samar Dev, once was. And am no more.*

*Be patient, stone, another fingertip will come, to follow the track. We mark you and you mark us. Stone and flesh, stone and flesh . . .*

Karsa slid down from Havok, paused to stretch out his back. He had been thinking much of late, mostly about his people, the proud, naïve Teblor. The ever-tightening siege that was the rest of the world, a place of cynicism, a place where virtually every shadow was painted in cruelty, in countless variations on the same colourless hue. Did he truly want to lead his people into such a world? Even to deliver a most poetic summation to all these affairs of civilization?

He had seen, after all, the poison of such immersion, when observing the Tiste Edur in the city of Letheras. Conquerors wandering bewildered, lost, made useless by success. An emperor who could not rule even himself. And the Crippled God had wanted Karsa to take up that sword. With such a weapon in his hands, he would lead his warriors down from the mountains, to bring to an end all things. To become the living embodiment of the suffering the Fallen One so cherished.

He had not even been tempted. Again and again, in their disjointed concourse, the Crippled God had revealed his lack of understanding when it came to Karsa Orlong. He made his every gift to Karsa an invitation to be broken in some fashion. *But I cannot be broken.* The truth, so simple, so direct, seemed to be an invisible force as far as the Crippled God was concerned, and each time he collided with it he was surprised, dumbfounded. Each time, he was sent reeling.

Of course, Karsa understood all about being stubborn. He also knew how such a trait could be fashioned into worthy armour, while at other times it did little more than reveal a consummate stupidity. Now, he wanted to reshape the world, and he knew it would resist him, yet he would hold to his desire. Samar Dev would call that 'stubborn', and in saying that she would mean 'stupid'. Like the Crippled God, the witch did not truly understand Karsa.

On the other hand, he understood her very well. 'You will not ride with me,' he said now as she rested against one of the stones, 'because you see it as a kind of surrender. If you must rush down this torrent, you will decide your own pace, as best you can.'

'Is that how it is?' she asked.

'Isn't it?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I don't know anything. I had some long forgotten god of war track me down. Why? What meaning was I supposed to take from that?'

'You are a witch. You awaken spirits. They scent you as easily as you do them.'

'What of it?'

'Why?'

'Why what?' she demanded.

'Why, Samar Dev, did you choose to become a witch?'

'That's – oh, what difference does that make?'

He waited.

'I was . . . curious. Besides, once you see that the world is filled with forces – most of which few people ever see, or even think about – then how can you not want to explore? Tracing all the patterns, discovering the webs of existence – it's no different from building a mechanism, the pleasure in working things out.'

He grunted. 'So you were curious. Tell me, when you speak with spirits, when you summon them and they come to you without coercion – why do you think they do that? Because, like you, they are curious.'

She crossed her arms. 'You're saying I'm trying to find significance in something that was actually pretty much meaningless. The bear sniffed me out and came for a closer look.'

He shrugged. 'These things happen.'

'I'm not convinced.'

'Yes,' he smiled, 'you are truly of this world, Samar Dev.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

He turned back to Havok and stroked the beast's dusty neck. 'The Tiste Edur failed. They were not thorough enough. They left the cynicism in place, and thought that through the strength of their own honour, they could defeat it. But the cynicism made their honour a hollow thing.' He glanced back at her. 'What was once a strength became an affectation.'

She shook her head, as if baffled.

Traveller moved to join them, and there was something haggard in his face. Seeing this odd, inexplicable transformation, Karsa narrowed his gaze on the man for a moment. Then he casually looked away.

'Perhaps the bear came to warn you,' he said to Samar Dev.

'About what?'

'What else? War.'

*'What war?'*

The shout made Havok shift under his hand, and he reached up to grasp the beast's wiry mane. Calming the horse, he then vaulted on to its back. 'Why, the one to come, I would think.'

She glared across at Traveller, and seemed to note for the first time the change that had come over him.

Karsa watched her take a step closer to Traveller. 'What is it? What has happened? What war is he talking about?'

'We should get moving,' he said, and then he set out.

She might weep. She might scream. But she did neither, and Karsa nodded to himself and then reached down one arm. 'This torrent,' he muttered, 'belongs to him, not us. Ride it with me, witch – you surrender nothing of value.'

'I don't?'

'No.'

She hesitated, and then stepped up and grasped hold of his arm.

When she was settled in behind him, Karsa tilted to one side and twisted round slightly to grin at her. 'Don't lie. It feels better already, does it not?'

'Karsa – what has happened to Traveller?'

He collected the lone rein and faced forward once more. 'Shadows,' he said, 'are cruel.'

Ditch forced open what he thought of as an eye. His eye. Draconus stood above the blind Tiste Andii, Kadaspala, reaching down and dragging the squealing creature up with both hands round the man's scrawny neck.

'You damned fool! It won't work that way, don't you see that?'

Kadaspala could only choke in reply.

Draconus glowered for a moment longer, and then flung the man back down on to the heap of bodies.

Ditch managed a croaking laugh.

Turning to skewer Ditch with his glare, Draconus said, 'He sought to fashion a damned god here!'

'And it shall speak,' Ditch said, 'in my voice.'

'No, *it shall not.* Do not fall into this trap, Wizard. Nothing must be fashioned of this place—'

'What difference? We all are about to die. Let the god open its eyes. Blink once or twice, and then give voice . . .' he laughed again, 'the first cry also the last. Birth and death with nothing in between. Is there anything more tragic, Draconus? Anything at all?'

'Dragnipur,' said Draconus, *'is nobody's womb.* Kadaspala, this was to be a cage. To keep Darkness in and Chaos out. One last, desperate barrier – the only gift we could offer. A gate that is denied its wandering must find a home, a refuge – a fortress, even one fashioned from flesh and bone. The pattern, Kadaspala, was meant to defy Chaos – two antithetical forces, as we discussed—'

'That will fail!' The blind Tiste Andii was twisting about at Draconus's feet, like an impaled worm. 'Fail, Draconus – we were fools, idiots. We were mad to think mad to think mad to *think* – give me this child, this wondrous creation – give me—'

'Kadaspala! The pattern – nothing more! Just the pattern, damn you!'

'Fails. Shatters. Shatters and fails shattering into failure. Failure failure failure. We die and we die and we die and we die!'

Ditch could hear the army marching in pursuit, steps like broken thunder, spears and standards clattering like a continent of reeds, the wind whistling through them. War chants erupting from countless mouths, no two the same, creating instead a war of discordance, a clamour of ferocious madness. The sound was more horrible than anything he had ever heard before – no mortal army could start such terror in a soul as this one did. And above it all, the sky raged, actinic and argent, seething, wrought through with blinding flashes from some descending devastation, ever closer descending – and when at last it struck, *the army will charge. Will sweep over us.*

Ditch looked about with his one eye – only to realize that it was still shut, gummed solid, that maybe he had no eye left at all, and that what he was seeing through was the pattern etched in black ink on his eyelid. *The god's eye? The pattern's eye? How is it I can see at all?* Draconus stood facing their wake, the convulsing figure at his feet forgotten for the moment.

Such studied belligerence, such a heroic pose, the kind that should be sculpted in immortal bronze. Heroism that needed the green stains of verdigris, the proof of centuries passed since last such noble forces existed in the world – any world, whatever world; no matter, details unimportant. The statue proclaims the great age now lost, the virtues left behind.

Civilizations made sure their heroes were dead before they honoured them. Virtue belonged to the dead, not the living. Everyone knew this. Lived with this, this permanent fall from grace that was the present age. The legacy squandered, because this was what people did with things they themselves have not earned.

He studied Draconus, and the man seemed to darken, blur, become strangely indistinct. Ditch gasped, and in the next instant Draconus was once more as he had always been.

So little of his mind was left, so little of what could be called his *self*, and these moments of clarity were fast diminishing. Was there irony to be found, should the chaos reach him only to find him already gone? Draconus was suddenly crouched down beside him.

'Ditch, listen to me. He's made you the nexus – you were meant to be the god's eyes – no, its brain – your pattern, the one upon your skin . . .'

Ditch grunted, amused. 'Each soul begins with a single word. He's written that word – on me. Identity is only a pattern. The beginning form. The world – life and experience – is Kadaspala, etching and etching the fine details. By life's end, who can even make out that first word?'

'It is within you,' said Draconus, 'to break that pattern, Ditch. Hold on to a part of yourself, hold tight to it – you may need it—'

'No, *you* may need it, Draconus.'

'There can be no child-god. Not fashioned of this *nightmare* – can't you understand that? It would be a horrid, terrible thing. Kadaspala is mad—'

'Yes,' agreed Ditch, 'most unfortunate. Mad. Not a good beginning, no.'

'Hold on, Ditch.'

'It's just a word.'

Draconus stared down into that painted eye. Then he rose, gathering up his chains, and moved out of Ditch's limited range of vision.

Kadaspala crawled close. 'He only wants to escape escape escape. But you but you but you are the knot the knot. Snapping tight! No one gets away. No one gets away. No one gets away. Hold still hold still and hold still until he awakens and he will awaken and so he will. Awaken. My child. The word, you see, the word is the word is the word. The word is *kill.'*

Ditch smiled. Yes, he'd known that. He had.

'Wait, sweet knot, and wait wait wait. Everything will make sense. Everything. Promise promise I promise and I do promise – for I have seen into the future. I know what's coming. I know all the plans. Her brother died and he should not have had to do that, no. No, he shouldn't have had to do that. I do this for her for her for her. Only for her.

'Knot, I do this for her.'

*Kill*, thought Ditch, nodding, *kill, yes, I understand. I do. Kill, for her. Kill.* And he found that the word itself, yes, the word itself, knew how to smile.

Even as the ashes rained down.

Beneath a sprawl of stars, Precious Thimble stood by the side of the track, watching the carriage approach. The repairs looked makeshift even in the gloom and the entire contraption rocked and wobbled. She saw Glanno Tarp perched on the high bench, his splinted legs splayed wide, and the horses tossed their heads, ears flattened and eyes rolling.

Figures walked to either side. Mappo and Gruntle on the left, Reccanto Ilk, the Boles and that wretched Cartographer on the right. Master Quell, presumably, was inside.

Beside Precious, Faint muttered something under her breath and then climbed to her feet. 'Wake up, Sweetest, they're finally here.'

From the town known as Reach of Woe, half a league distant, not a single glimmer of light showed.

Precious approached Gruntle. 'What happened back there?'

He shook his head. 'You truly do not want to know, Witch.'

'Why do Jaghut bother getting married at all?' Reccanto asked, his face pale as the moon. 'Gods below, like Glanno might say, that was the most petty-tracted nefoaminous argument I ever seen! 'Twas still in full swing when we blaggered it outa there.'

'Blaggered?' said Faint. 'The carriage can barely crawl, Ilk.'

'Ain't nothing so tensifying as running for your life at a snail's pace, let me tell you, but if it wasn't for Master's protecterives we'd be nothing but flops of hairy skin and chunks of meat like everyone else back there.'

Precious Thimble shivered and made a warding gesture.

Master Quell emerged from the carriage after forcing open an ill-hung door. He was sheathed in sweat. 'What a damned world this is,' he said raggedly.

'I thought we were on an island,' Jula said, frowning.

'We heading back to sea?' Precious asked Quell.

'Not a chance – the carriage wouldn't hold. We need to find a more civil place to hole up.'

She watched him walk off the track to find a private place where he could groan and sigh as he emptied his bladder, or at least tried to – he never wandered far enough. 'You need a practitioner of High Denul,' she called after him.

'As you say, Witch, as you say . . .'

Cartographer had found a stick from somewhere and was scraping out patterns on the dirt of the road a dozen paces ahead. Precious Thimble squinted at him. 'What's that thing doing?'

No one seemed to have an answer.

After a long pause, Sweetest Sufferance spoke. 'Either of you other girls feeling a tad bloodthirsty?'

Well, that woke everyone else up fast enough, Precious Thimble observed a short while later, still struggling with her own panic. That damned lardball was still half convulsed in laughter, and Precious was of a mind to stick a knife in one of those teary eyes, and she doubted anyone would try to stop her.

Master Quell reappeared. 'What's so funny, Sweetest? Oh, never mind.' He surveyed everyone else with a pinched, uncomfortable expression, like a

man who'd sat on a cork. 'The night stinks – anybody else noticed that? I was thinking of Rashan, but now I'm not so sure.'

'You need only take me as far as a port,' said Mappo. 'I can find my own way from there.'

Quell squinted at him. 'We'll deliver you as agreed, Trell—'

'The risks—'

'Are why we charge as much as we do. Now, no more about that, and don't even think of just cancelling the contract – we'd take that as a grievous insult, a slur on our good name. We'll get you there, Trell, even if it's on one wheel behind a three-legged horse.'

Cartographer tottered back to them. 'If it pleases,' he said, attempting a smile that Precious decided was too ghoulish to describe without descending into insanity, 'I have outlined a solution.'

'Sorry I missed it,' said Quell.

'He meant that literally,' said Precious, pointing up the road.

Quell in the lead, they walked up to observe the faint scouring on the pale dust of the track.

'What in Hood's name is that?'

'A map, of course.'

'What kind of map?'

'Our journey to come.'

Reccanto Ilk squatted to study the effort, and then shook his head. 'I can't even make out the island we're on. This is a stupid map, Cartogopher.' He straightened and nodded to the others. 'That's what you get tryin' to work with a dead man. I swear, common sense is the first to go when you turn into the walking dead – why is that?'

The Bole brothers looked thoughtful, as if working on possible answers. Then, noticing each other's frown, both broke into smiles. Amby snorted

then had to wipe goo from his upper lip with the back of one hand.

'I must be mad,' Precious whispered.

Quell asked, 'This is some kind of gate you've drawn here, Cartographer?'

'Absent of investiture, but yes. I have no power to give it. But then, you do.'

'Maybe,' Quell mused, 'but I don't recognize anything you've drawn, and that makes me nervous.'

Cartographer walked along one side and pointed a withered finger down at the far end of the map. 'Do you see this straight, wide groove? All the rest funnels into this path, the path we need to take. The best maps show you the right direction. The best maps are the ones that lead you to a specific destination.'

Reccanto Ilk scratched at his head, looking bewildered. 'But that's what maps are for – what's he glommering on about?'

'Not all maps,' corrected Cartographer, with a shake of his head – and nothing, Precious concluded, could ever be as solemn as a dead man's shake of the head. 'Objective rendition is but one form in the art of cartography, and not even the most useful one.'

'If you say so,' said Master Quell. 'I'm still uneasy.'

'You have few other options, Wizard. The carriage is damaged. The marital argument is even now extending beyond the town's limits and will soon engulf this entire island in a conflagration of disputing versions of who-said-what.'

'He's smarter than he was before,' observed Faint.

'That's true,' said Reccanto.

'I gather more of myself, yes,' said Cartographer, giving them all another ghastly smile.

Flinches all round.

'How come,' asked Quell, 'you never showed this talent before?'

The corpse straightened. 'I have displayed numerous talents on this journey, each one appropriate to the situation at the time. Have you forgotten the coconuts?'

Faint rolled her eyes and said, 'How could we forget the coconuts?'

'Besides,' resumed Cartographer, 'as an uninvited guest, I feel a pressing need to contribute to the enterprise.' One ragged hand gestured at the scribbles on the track. 'Invest power into this, Master Quell, and we can be on our way.'

'To somewhere we can stop for a time?'

Cartographer shrugged. 'I am not able to predict the situations awaiting us, only that in general they are not particularly threatening.'

Quell looked as if he needed to piss again. Instead, he turned back to the carriage. 'Everyone on board. Precious, you're with me as usual. Same for you, Mappo.' He paused. 'The rest of you, get ready.'

'For what?' Gruntle asked.

'For anything, of course.'

Reccanto, still strutting after his extraordinary on-the-knees skewering lunge, slapped one hand on the huge warrior's back. 'Don't fret, friend, you'll get used to all this eventually. Unless,' he added, 'it kills you first.'

Cartographer held up some ropes. 'Who will kindly tie me to a wheel?'

Night sweeps across the Dwelling Plain. Along the vast vault of the sky the stars are faint, smudged, as if reluctant to sharpen to knife points amidst the strangely heavy darkness. The coyotes mute their cries for this night. Wolves flee half blind in formless terror, and some will run until their hearts burst.

South of the western tail of the Gadrobi Hills, a lone chain-clad figure pauses in his journey, seeing at last the faint bluish glow that is the ever-beating heart of the great, legendary city.

Darujhistan.

Three leagues west of him, three more strangers gaze upon that selfsame glow, and in the eyes of one of them – unseen by the others – there is such dread, such anguish, as would crush the soul of a lesser man. His gauntleted hand steals again and again to the leather-wrapped grip of his sword.

He tells himself that vengeance answered is peace won, but even he does not quite believe that. Beyond the city awaiting him, the future is a vast absence, a void he now believes he will never see, much less stride into.

Yet, for all the tumultuous, seething forces of will within these arrayed strangers, none among them is the cause of the night's thick, palpable silence.

Less than a league north of the three strangers, seven Hounds are arrayed along a ridge, baleful eyes fixed upon the glow of the city.

The beasts possess the capacity to detect a rabbit's rapid heartbeat half a league away, so they hear well the tolling of the twelfth bell, announcing the arrival of midnight in the city of Darujhistan.

And as one, the seven Hounds lift their massive heads, and give voice to a howl.

The stars are struck into blazing sparks overhead. The High King halts in mid-stride, and the ancient, stubborn blood in his veins and arteries suddenly floods cold as ice. For the first time in this journey, Kallor knows a moment of fear.

Havok's long head snaps up and the beast skitters to one side. Astride the animal, Samar Dev makes a desperate grab for Karsa, lest she be thrown to the ground, and she can feel the sudden tautness of every muscle in the huge warrior.

Ahead of them, Traveller pauses, his shoulders hunching as if those all too close howls even now lash at his back. Then he shakes himself, and marches on.

Atop a cornice of a gate facing the south plain, a squat toad-like demon lifts its head, pointed ears suddenly alert.

Then, as the howls slowly fade, the demon settles once more.

Although now, at last, it can feel, rising up from the very earth, rising up to shiver along its bones, the rumble of heavy paws on distant ground.

Drawing closer, ever closer.

In the city behind Chillbais, the twelfth bell clangs its sonorous note. Another season's grand fête is almost gone. One more day in the name of Gedderone. One more night to close the riot of senseless celebration.

*Dance, and dance on.*

*Because, as everyone knows, all that you see about you will last, well . . . for ever!*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

My friend, this is not the place
The cut flowers lie scattered on the path
And the light of the moon glistens
In what the stems bleed

In the day just for ever lost
I watched a black wasp darting into the face
Of a web, and the spider she dropped
Only to be caught in mid-air

Footfalls leave no trace
In the wake of a hungry creature's wrath
You can only lie in hope, dreaming
She lightly touched ground

And danced away like a breath
Hiding beneath leaves nodding in place
While the hunter circles and listens
But pray nothing is found

My friend, this is not your face
So pale and still never again to laugh
When the moon's light fell and then stopped
Cold as silver in the glade

Look back on the day, it's for ever lost
Stare into the night, where things confound
The web stretches empty, wind keening
In threads of absent songs

*(Song of) Old Friend*
Fisher

Voluminous in wonder, but, be assured, terse in grief. Consider the woodsman standing facing the forest, axe in hand. In a moment he will stride forward. Consider now the first line of trees, rooted, helpless against what comes.

The seep of trickling water round roots does not quicken. The sweet warmth of sunlight on leaves does not blaze into urgent flame. The world and its pace cannot change. What is to be done? Why, there is nothing to be done. The woodsman swings his axe with blinding speed and splendid indifference, and he hears not the chorus of cries.

Is this fancy worthless? For some, perhaps many, it must be. But know this, empathy is no game.

Twist back time. Dusk still gathers, but it is early yet and so it is a weak gathering. A lone rider draws up on a ridge overlooking a mining camp. Up here the sun's light remains. Dust streams gold and nothing wants to settle. In the shadowy pit below figures seethe back and forth.

He is finally seen. An old man works his way up the path. A runner hurries to the main building squatting atop a levelled heap of tailings.

It begins.

'Another guest? Come for the boy? What's so damned special about that boy?' But Gorlas Vidikas wasn't much interested in any answers to those questions, especially since this runner was in no position to explain much of anything, having been sent direct from the foreman. He rose and pulled on his cloak, then collected up his fine deerskin gloves, and set out. Would he have the pleasure of killing yet another fool? He dearly hoped so.

Was it that pompous old bastard, Coll? That would be ideal, and who could say, maybe the ghost of Lady Simtal would stir awake at the man's last gasp, to howl her delight at this most perfect vengeance, this long-awaited conclusion to the vile treachery of her last fête. Of course, that was mostly Hanut Orr's business, and maybe Shardan Lim's as well, but Gorlas welcomed the sudden unexpected currency he would reap in reward for killing at least two of the old conspirators.

Coll's death would also leave open a seat on the Council. Gorlas smiled at the thought as he climbed the slatted wooden steps up towards the ridge where it wound behind and above the main building. Humble Measure would offer up his own reward for such a thing, no doubt one that would make the gratitude of Hanut and Shardan seem like a pauper's grudging gift. He had a sudden, odd image then of a half-dozen such paupers – beggars and worse – gathered in some abandoned building, squatting on damp earth as they passed round a pathetic slab of grainy bread and a mouldy lump of cheese. And, as he looked on like some unseen ghost, he had the sense that the circle was somehow . . . incomplete.

*Someone is missing. Who's missing?*

He shook himself then, dispelling the scene, and found that he had halted just below the landing, one hand on the rail at his side. At that last moment, as the image burst apart, he thought he had caught a glimpse of something – a corpse twisting beneath a thick branch, the face swinging round to meet his own – then gone.

Gorlas found his mouth unaccountably dry. Had some god or spirit sent him a vision? Well, if something or someone had, it was a poor one, for he could make no sense of it, none at all.

He tugged on his gloves and resumed the climb, emerging out into the blessed sunlight where everything was painted gold. Yes, the wealth of the world was within reach. He'd never understood poor people, their stupidity, their lack of ambition, their laziness. So much within reach – couldn't they see that? And then how dare they bitch and complain and cast him dark looks, when he went and took all that he could? Let them fall to the wayside, let them tumble underfoot. He was going where he wanted to be and if that meant pushing them out of the way, or crushing them down, so be it.

Why, he could have been born in the damned gutter, and he'd still be where he was today. It was his nature to succeed, to win. The fools could keep their resentment and envy. Hard work, discipline, and the courage to grasp opportunity when it presented itself – these were all the things most people lacked. What they didn't lack, not in the least, was the boundless

energy to complain. Bitterness was a waste of energy, and, like acid, it ate the vessel that held it.

As he came round the curve of the ridge he saw at once that the man awaiting him was not Coll. Nor, Gorlas realized, was he a stranger. *Gods below, can this be? Oponn, is it you so blessing me now? Pull me forward, Lady. Shove him closer, Lord.*

The young man (well, they were of the same age, but not in Gorlas's eyes) saw him approach and slowly dismounted, stepping round the horse and positioning himself in the centre of the path facing Gorlas.

'She was not foolish enough to send you here, was she?'

'You know me, then.'

Gorlas smiled. 'I watched you once, only a few days back, from across a street. You looked guilty, did you know that? You looked like a coward – what is your name? I want to know your name, so I can be precise when I tell her what I've done to you . . . and your corpse.'

The man stood unmoving, arms at his sides. 'I am not here for Challice,' he said.

'If you want to think it was all your idea, fine. But I should tell you, I know her well – far better than you. She's been working on you, filling your head – she's pretty much led you here by the hand, even if you're too thick to realize it. Of course, she probably didn't want anyone too smart, since a clever man would have seen through her deadly scheming. A clever man would have walked away. Or run.'

The man tilted his head slightly. 'What is the value of all this, Gorlas Vidikas?'

Gorlas sighed, glanced back at the foreman, who stood watching and listening – yes, something would have to be done about that – and then faced the man once more. 'Since you're too much the coward to actually tell me your name, I will just have to slice off your face, to take back to her as proof. Look at you, you're not even wearing a sword. Foreman! Do we still have Murillio's rapier? I forget, did that go back with him?'

'Not sure, sir – want me to go and look?'

'Well, find the waif a sword. Anything will do – it's not as if he knows how to use it in any case. And hurry, before we lose the light and the mob down there gets bored waiting.' He smiled at the man. 'They've got bloodthirsty of late – my fault, that—'

'Yes, about Murillio . . .'

'Ah, is that why you've come? The duel was fairly fought. He simply could not match my skill.'

'Where is the boy?'

'So he's the reason you're here? This is getting difficult to believe. The child's not some orphaned prince or something, is he? Rather, *was* he?'

'Was?'

'Yes. He's dead, I'm afraid.'

'I see.'

'So, still interested?' Gorlas asked. 'Of course, that's not really relevant any more, because I want you to stay. I suppose you can try to run, but I assure you, you'll be cut down before you get astride that fine horse – a horse I will welcome in my stables. Tell me, are you a better duellist than Murillio was? You'll have to be. Much better.'

The foreman had gone halfway down the trail before yelling instructions, and now a youth was scurrying up cradling a sword – not Murillio's, but something found in one of the workings from the look of it. Thin, tapered to a point that was slightly bent. Iron, at least, but the patina was a thick crust over the blade's spine, and both edges were severely notched. The handle, Gorlas saw as the foreman – breath wheezing – delivered it, wasn't even wrapped.

'Sorry about the lack of grip,' Gorlas said. 'But really, you should have come prepared.'

'How did it feel,' the man asked, 'killing an old man?'

'The duel was fair—'

'Agreed to the death? I doubt that, Vidikas.'

'I dislike the lack of respect in using my last name like that – especially when you won't even tell me your name.'

'Well, your wife calls you Useless, so if you'd prefer that . . .'

Gorlas flung the weapon at the man's feet, where it skidded in a puff of golden dust. 'On guard,' he ordered in a rasp. 'To the death.'

The man made no move to pick up the weapon. He stood as he had before, head tipped a fraction to one side.

'You are a coward in truth,' Gorlas said, drawing his rapier. 'Cowards do not deserve to be treated with honour, so let us dispense with convention—'

'I was waiting for you to say that.'

The foreman, standing off to one side, still struggling with the ache in his chest from a labouring heart, was in the process of licking his gritty lips. Before he had finished that instinctive flicker, the scene before him irrevocably changed.

And Gorlas Vidikas was falling forward, landing hard. His rapier rolled from his hand to catch up in the grass lining the track. Dust puffed up, then slowly settled.

The stranger – had he even moved? the foreman was unsure – now turned to him and said, 'You heard him dispense with the rules of the duel, correct?'

The foreman nodded.

'And, think back now, good sir, did you even once hear me voice a formal challenge?'

'Well, I was part of the way down the trail for a moment—'

'But not beyond range of hearing, I'm sure.'

'Ah, no, unless you did whisper something—'

'Think back. Gorlas was babbling on and on – could I have said anything even if I'd wanted to?'

'True enough, thinking on it.'

'Then are we satisfied here?'

'Ain't for me to say that either way,' the foreman replied. 'It's the man this one was working for.'

'Who, being absent, will have to rely solely upon your report.'

'Er, I suppose so.'

The man shrugged. 'Do as you see fit, then.' He glanced down into the pit. 'You get the feeling they're about to start cheering,' he said.

'They ain't decided.'

'No?'

'They ain't decided if whoever replaces Vidikas is gonna be any better, you see?'

'Because, in their experience, they're all the same.'

The foreman nodded. 'Didn't think you was nobleborn.'

'No, I'm not.'

'No, you're pretty much like them below. Like me, even.'

'I suppose so.' The man walked to the body of Gorlas Vidikas, bent down to roll it on to its back, and the foreman saw the two knife handles, blades buried to the hilts, jutting from Gorlas's chest.

He decided to lick his lips again, and somehow the dust suddenly tasted sweeter. 'Know anything 'bout property law, by any chance?'

'Sorry, what?'

'Like, if I was paying on a loan to this man—'

'No, no idea. Though I imagine if you just sit tight, maybe wait to see if anybody ever shows up to collect, well, that would hardly be considered illegal. Would it now?'

'No, seems proper enough to me,' the foreman agreed.

The man worked the knives back out, wiped the blood off on the stained, rumpled cloak. 'Did he tell true about Harllo?'

'What? Oh. He did. The lad tried to escape, and was killed.'

The man sighed, and then straightened. 'Ah, shit, Murillio,' he muttered. 'I'm sorry.'

'Wait – this Harllo – was he that important? I mean—' and the foreman gestured, to encompass not only the corpse lying on the road, but the one that had been there the day before as well, 'all this killing. Who *was* Harllo?'

The man walked to his horse and swung himself into the saddle. He collected the reins. 'I'm not sure,' he said after a moment's consideration. 'The way it started, well, it seemed . . .' he hesitated, and then said, 'he was a boy nobody loved.'

Bitter and scarred as he was, even the foreman winced at that. 'Most of 'em are, as end up here. Most of 'em are.'

The man studied him from the saddle.

The foreman wondered – he didn't see much in the way of triumph or satisfaction in that face looking down at him. He wasn't sure what he was seeing, in fact. Whatever it was, it didn't fit.

The stranger drew the horse round and set off up the road. Heading back to the city.

The foreman coughed up a throatful of rank phlegm, then stepped forward and spat down, quite precisely, on to the upturned face of Gorlas Vidikas. Then he turned round. 'I want three guards and the fastest horses we got!' He watched the runner scramble.

From the pit below rose the occasional snatch of harsh laughter. The foreman understood that well enough, and so he nodded. 'Damn and below, I'll give 'em all an extra flagon of ale anyway.'

Cutter rode for a time as dusk surrendered to darkness. The horse was the first to sense a loss of will, as the rider on its back ceased all efforts at guiding its pace. The beast dropped from a canter to a trot, then a walk, and then it came to rest and stood at the edge of the road, head lowering to snag a tuft of grass.

Cutter stared down at his hands, watched as the reins slithered free. And then he began to weep. For Murillio, for a boy he had never met. But most of all, he wept for himself.

*Come to me, my love. Come to me now.*

A short time later, three messengers thundered past – paying him no heed at all. The drum of horse hoofs was slow to fade, and the clouds of dust left in their wake hung suspended, lit only by starlight.

Venaz the hero, Venaz who followed orders, and if those meant something vicious, even murderous, then that was how it would be. No questions, no qualms. He had returned up top in grim triumph. Another escape thwarted, the message sweetly delivered. Even so, he liked being thorough. In fact, he'd wanted to make sure.

And so, in keeping with his new privileges as head of the moles, when he collected a knotted climbing rope and set off back into the tunnels, he was not accosted. He could do as he liked now, couldn't he? And when he returned, carrying whatever proof he could find of the deaths of Bainisk and Harllo, then Gorlas Vidikas would see just how valuable he was, and Venaz would find a new life for himself.

Good work led to good rewards. A simple enough truth.

Whatever flood had filled part of the passage deep in the Settle had mostly drained away, easing his trek to the crevasse. When he reached it he crouched at the edge, listening carefully – to make certain that no one was still alive, maybe scuffling about in the pitch blackness down below.

Satisfied, he worked Bainisk's rope off the knob of stone and replaced it with his own, then sent the rest of the coil tumbling over the edge.

Venaz set his lantern to its lowest setting and tied half a body-length of twine to the handle, and the other end to one ankle. He let the lantern down, and then followed with his legs. He brought both feet together, the rope in between, and edged further over until they rested on a knot. Now, so long as the twine didn't get fouled with the rope, he'd be fine.

Moving with great caution, he began his descent.

Broken, bleeding bodies somewhere below, killed by rocks – not by Venaz, since he'd not even cut the rope. Bainisk had done that, the fool. Still, Venaz could take the credit – nothing wrong with that.

Even with the knots, the slow going was making his arms and shoulders ache. He didn't really have to do this. But maybe it would be the one deed that made all the difference in the eyes of Gorlas Vidikas. Nobles looked for certain things, mysterious things. They were born with skills and talents. He needed to show the man as much as he could of his own talents and all that.

The lantern clunked below him and he looked down to see the faint blush of dull light playing across dry, jagged stones. A few moments later he was standing, somewhat uneasily as the rocks shifted about beneath him. He untied the lantern and put away the twine, and then twisted the wick up a couple of notches. The circle of light widened.

He saw Bainisk's feet, the worn soles of the moccasins, the black-spattered shins, both of which were snapped and showing the split ends of bones. But there was no flowing blood. Bainisk was dead as dead come.

He worked his way closer and stared down at the smashed face, slightly startled by the way it seemed fixed in a smile.

Venaz crouched. He would collect Bainisk's belt-pouch, where he kept all his valuables – the small ivory-handled knife that Venaz so coveted; the half-dozen coppers earned as rewards for special tasks; the one silver coin that Bainisk had cherished the most, as it showed on one face a city skyline beneath a rainbow or some sort of huge moon filling the sky – a coin,

someone had said, from Darujhistan, but long ago, in the time of the Tyrants. Treasures now belonging to Venaz.

But he could not find the pouch. He rolled the body over, scanned the blood-smeared rocks beneath and to all sides. No pouch. Not even fragments of string.

He must have given it to Harllo. Or maybe he'd lost it somewhere back up the passage – if Venaz didn't find it down here he could make a careful search on his way back up top.

Now, time to find the other boy, the one he'd hated almost from the first. Always acted like he was smarter than everyone else. It was that look in his eyes, as if he knew he was better, so much better it was easy to be nice to all the stupider people. Easy to smile and say nice things. Easy to be helpful and generous.

Venaz wandered out from Bainisk's body. Something was missing – and not just Harllo's body. And then, after a moment, he realized what it was. The rest of the damned rope, which should have fallen close to the cliff base, close to Bainisk. The damned rope was gone – *and so was Harllo*.

He worked his way along the crevasse and after twenty or so steps he reached the edge of the floor, which he discovered wasn't a floor at all, but a plug, a bridge of fallen rock. The crevasse dropped away an unknown depth, and the air rising from below was hot and dry. Frightened by the realization that he was standing on something that could collapse and fall away at any moment, Venaz hurried back in the other direction.

Harllo was probably badly hurt. He must have been. Unless . . . maybe he had been already down, standing, holding the damned rope, just waiting for Bainisk to join him. Venaz found his mouth suddenly dry. He'd been careless. That wouldn't go down well, would it? This could only work out right if he tracked the runt down and finished him off. The thought sent a cold tremor through him – he'd never actually killed somebody before. Could he even do it? He'd have to, to make everything right.

The plug sloped slightly upward on the other side of Bainisk's body, and each chunk of stone was bigger, the spaces between them whistling with

winds from below. Terrifying grating sounds accompanied his every tender step.

Fifteen paces on, another sudden drop-off. Baffled, Venaz worked his way along the edge. He reached the facing wall – the other side of the crevasse – and held high the lantern. In the light he saw an angular fissure, two shelves of bedrock where one side had shifted faster and farther than the other – he could even see where the broken seams continued between the shelves. The drop had been about a body's height, and the fissure – barely a forearm wide – angled sharply into a kind of chute.

Bainisk would never have squeezed into that crack. But Harllo could, and did – it was the only way off the plug.

Venaz retied the lantern, and then forced himself into the fissure. A tight fit. He could only draw half-breaths before the cage of his ribs met solid, unyielding stone. Whimpering, he pushed himself deeper, but not so deep as to get stuck – no, to climb he'd need at least one arm free. By crabbing one leg sideways and squirming with his torso, he moved himself into a position whereby he could hitch himself up in increments. The dry, baked feel of the stone began as a salvation. Had it been wet he would simply have slid back down again and again. Before he'd managed two man-heights, however, he was slick with sweat, and finding streaks of the same above him, attesting to Harllo's own struggles. And he found that the only way he could hold himself in place between forward hitches was to take the deepest breath he could manage, turning his own chest into a wedge, a plug. The rough, worn fabric of his tunic was rubbing his skin raw.

How much time passed? How long this near vertical passage? Venaz lost all sense of such details. He was in darkness, a world of stone walls, dry gusts of air along one flank, a right arm that screamed with fatigue. He bled. He oozed sweat. He was a mass of scrapes and gouges. But then the fissure widened in step fractures, each one providing a blessed ledge on which to finally rest his quivering muscles. Widening, becoming a manageable chute. He was able to draw in deep breaths, and the creaking ache of his ribs slowly faded. He continued on, and before long he reached a new stress

fracture, this one cutting straight into the bedrock, perpendicular to the chute.

Venaz hesitated, and then worked his way into it, to see how far it went – and almost instantly he smelled humus, faint and stale, and a little farther in he arrived at an almost horizontal dip where forest detritus had settled. Behind that heady smell there was something else – acrid, fresh. He brightened the lantern and held it out before him. A steep slope of scree rose along the passage, and even as he scanned it there was the clatter of stones bouncing down to patter amidst the dried leaves and dead moss.

He hurried to the base of the slide and peered upward.

And saw Harllo – no more than twenty man-heights above him, flattened on the scree, pulling himself upward with feeble motions.

Yes, he had smelled the boy.

Venaz smiled, and then quickly shuttered the lantern. If Harllo found out he was being chased still, he might try to kick loose a deadly slide of the rubble – of course, if he did that it'd take him down with it. Harllo wasn't stupid. Any wrong move on this slide and they'd both die. The real risk was when he reached the very top, pulling clear. Then there could be real trouble for Venaz.

And smell that downward draught – that was fresh, clean air. Smelling of reeds and mud. The lake shore.

Venaz thought about things, and thought some more. And then settled on a plan. A desperate, risky one. But really, he had no choice. No matter what, Harllo would hear him on this climb. Fine, then, let him.

He laughed, a low, throaty laugh that he knew would travel up the stones like a hundred serpents, coiling with icy poison round Harllo's heart. Laughed, and then crooned, *'Harrrllo! Found youuu!'*

And he heard an answering cry. A squeal like a crippled puppy underfoot, a whimper of bleak terror. And all of this was good.

Panic was what he wanted. Not the kind that would make the boy scrabble wildly – since that might just send him all the way back down – but the kind that would, once he gained the top, send him flying out into the night, to run and run and run.

Venaz abandoned the lantern and began climbing.

The chase was torturous. Like two worms they snaked up the dusty slabs of shale. Desperate flight and pursuit were both trapped in the stuttering beating of hearts, the quaking gasps of needful lungs. All trapped inside, for their limbs could move but slowly, locked in an agonizing tentativeness. Minute slides froze them both, queasy shifts made them spread arms and legs wide, breaths held, eyes squeezed shut.

Venaz would have to kill him. For all of this, Harllo would die. There was no other choice now, and Venaz found it suddenly easy to think about choking the life from the boy. His hands round Harllo's chicken neck, the face above them turning blue, then grey. Jutting tongue, bulging eyes – yes, that wouldn't be hard at all.

Sudden scrambling above, a skitter of stones, and then Venaz realized he was alone on the slide. Harllo had reached the surface, and thank the gods, he was *running.*

*Your one mistake, Harllo, and now I'll have you. Your throat in my hands.*

*I have you.*

The soft whisper of arrivals once more awakens, even as figures depart. From places of hiding, from refuges, from squalid nests. Into the streams of darkness, shadowy shapes slide unseen.

Thordy watched as the killer who was her husband set out from the cage of lies they called, with quaint irony, their home. As his chopping footfalls faded, she walked out to her garden, to stand at the edge of the pavestone circle. She looked skyward, but there was no moon as yet, no bright smudge to bleach the blue glow of the city's gaslight.

A voice murmured in her head, a heavy, weighted voice. And what it told her made her heart slow its wild hammering, brought peace to her thoughts.

Even as it spoke, in measured tones, of a terrible legacy of death.

She drew the one decent kitchen knife they possessed, and held the cold flat of the blade against one wrist. In this odd, ominous stance, she waited.

In the city, at that moment, Gaz walked an alley. Wanting to find someone. Anyone. To kill, to beat into a ruin, smashing bones, bursting eyes, tearing slack lips across the sharp stumps of broken teeth. Anticipation was such a delicious game, wasn't it?

In another home, this one part residence, part studio, Tiserra dried her freshly washed hands. Every sense within her felt suddenly raw, as if scraped with crushed glass. She hesitated, listening, hearing naught but her own breathing, this frail bellows of life that now seemed so frighteningly vulnerable. Something had begun. She was, she realized, terrified.

Tiserra hurried to a certain place in the house. Began a frantic search. Found the hidden cache where her husband had stored his precious gifts from the Blue Moranth.

Empty.

Yes, she told herself, her husband was no fool. He was a survivor – it was his greatest talent. Hard won at that – nowhere near that treacherous arena where Oponn played push and pull. He'd taken what he needed. He'd done what he could.

She stood, feeling helpless. This particular feeling was not pleasant, not pleasant at all. It promised that the night ahead would stretch out into eternity.

Blend descended to the main floor, where she paused. The bard sat on the edge of the stage, tuning his lyre. Duiker sat at his usual table, frowning at a tankard of ale that his hands were wrapped round as if he was throttling some hard, unyielding fate.

Antsy – Antsy was in gaol. Scillara had wandered out a few bells earlier and had not returned. Barathol was spending his last night in his own cell – he'd be on a wagon headed out to some ironworks come the dawn.

Picker was lying on a cot upstairs, eyes closed, breaths shallow and weak. She was, in truth, gone. Probably never to return.

Blend drew on her cloak. Neither man paid her any attention.

She left the bar.

Ever since the pretty scary woman had left earlier – how long, days, weeks, years, Chaur had no idea – he had sat alone, clutching the sweating lance a dead man wearing a mask had once given C'ur, and rocking back and forth. Then, all at once, he wanted to leave. Why? Because the gulls outside never stopped talking, and the boat squeaked like a rat in a fist, and all the slapping water made him need to pee.

Besides, he had to find Baral. The one face that was always kind, making it easy to remember. The face that belonged to Da and Ma both, just one face, to make it easier to remember. Without Baral, the world turned cold. And mean, and nothing felt solid, and trying to stay together when everything else wasn't was so hard.

So he dropped the lance, rose and set out.

To find Baral. And yes, he knew where to find him. How he knew no one could say. How he thought, no one could imagine. How deep and vast his love, no one could conceive.

Spite stood across the street from the infernal estate that was the temporary residence of her infernal sister, and contemplated her next move, each consideration accompanied by a pensive tap of one finger against her full, sweetly painted lips.

All at once that tapping finger froze in mid-tap, and she slowly cocked her head. 'Oh,' she murmured. And again, 'Oh.'

The wind howled in the distance.

But, of course, there was no wind, was there?

'Oh.'

And how would this change things?

A guard, ignoring once more the dull ache in his chest and the occasional stab of pain shooting down his left arm, walked out from the guard annexe to begin his rounds, making his way to the Lakefront District and the wall that divided it from the Daru District – the nightly murders had begun clustering to either side of that wall. Maybe this time he'd be lucky and see something – someone – and everything would fall into place. Maybe.

He had put in a requisition for a mage, a necromancer, in fact, but alas the wheels of bureaucracy ground reluctantly in such matters. It would probably take the slaying of someone important before things could lurch into motion. He really couldn't wait for that. Finding this killer had become a personal crusade.

The night was strangely quiet, given that it marked the culmination of the Gedderone Fête. Most people were still in the taverns and bars, he told himself, even as he fought off a preternatural unease, and even as he noted the taut expressions of those people he passed, and the way they seemed to scurry by. Where was the revelry? The delirious dancing? *Early yet*, he told himself. But those two words and everything behind them felt oddly flat.

He could hear a distant storm on the plains south of the city. Steady thunder, an echoing wind, and he told himself he was feeling that storm's approach. Nothing more, just the usual *fizz* in the air that preceded such events.

He hurried on, grimacing at the ache in his chest, still feeling the parting kiss of his wife on his lips, the careless hugs of his children round his waist.

He was a man who would never ask for sympathy. He was a man who sought only to do what was right. Such people appear in the world, every world, now and then, like a single refrain of some blessed song, a fragment caught on the spur of an otherwise raging cacophony.

Imagine a world without such souls.

Yes, it should have been harder to do.

After a rather extended time of muted regard fixed dully upon a sealed crypt, four mourners began their return journey to the Phoenix Inn, where

Meese would make a grim discovery – although one that, in retrospect, did not in fact shock her as much as it might have.

Before they had gone five hundred paces, however, Rallick Nom drew to a sudden halt. 'I must leave you now,' he said to the others.

'Kruppe understands.'

And the assassin narrowed his gaze upon the short, solemn-faced man.

'Where,' Rallick asked, 'will this go, Kruppe?'

'The future, my friend, is ever turned away, even when it faces us.'

To this bizarre, unlikely truism, Coll grunted, 'Gods below, Kruppe—' But Rallick had already completed his own turning away and was walking towards the mouth of an alley.

'I got a sick feeling inside,' Meese said.

Coll grunted a second time and then said, 'Let's go. I need to find me another bottle – this time with something in it that actually does something.'

Kruppe offered him a beatific smile. Disingenuous? *Really now.*

Seba Krafar, Master of the Assassins' Guild, surveyed his small army of murderers. Thirty-one in all. Granted, absurd overkill, but even so he found himself not quite as comfortable – or as confident – as such numbers should have made him. 'This is ridiculous,' he muttered under his breath. And then he gestured.

The mob shifted into three distinct groups, and then each hurried off in a different direction, to close on the target at the appointed time.

Come the morning, there'd be a newly vacated seat on the Council. Blood-drenched, true, but it would hardly be the first time for that, would it?

Shardan Lim saw before him a perfect future. He would, if all went well, finally step out from Hanut Orr's shadow. And into his own shadow he'd drag Gorlas Vidikas. They would be sharing a woman, after all, and there would be no measured balance in that situation, since Gorlas was next to

useless when it came to satisfying Challice. So Gorlas would find that his wife's happiness was dependent not upon him, but upon the other man sharing her pleasure – Shardan Lim – and when the first child arrived, would there be any doubt as to its progeny? An heir of provable bloodline, the perfect usurpation of House Vidikas.

He had set out alone this night, making his casual way to the Vidikas estate, and he now stood opposite the front gate, studying the modest but well-constructed building. There were hints of Gadrobi in the style, he saw. The square corner tower that was actually higher than it looked, its rooms abandoned to dust and spiders – virtually identical edifices could still be found here and there in the Gadrobi District, and in the hills to the east of the city. Vines covered three of the four walls, reaching up from the garden. If the tower had been a tree it would be dead, centuries dead. Hollowed out by rot, the first hard wind would have sent it thrashing down. This deliberate rejection was no accident. Gadrobi blood among the nobles was an embarrassment. It had always been that way and it always would be.

When Shardan owned this estate, he would see it torn down. His blood was pure Daru. Same as Challice's own.

He heard horses approach at a dangerously fast canter, up from the lower city, and a few moments later three riders appeared, sharply reining in before the estate's gate.

Frowning, Shardan Lim stepped out and quickly approached.

Private guards of some sort, looking momentarily confused as they dismounted. Their horses were lathered, heads dipping as they snorted out phlegm.

'You three,' Shardan called out, and they turned. 'I am Councillor Shardan Lim, and I am about to visit the Vidikas estate. If you carry a message for Lady Challice, do permit me to deliver it.' As he drew closer, he offered the three men a comradely smile. 'She is a delicate woman – having three sweaty men descend on her wouldn't do. I'm sure you understand—'

'Forgive me, Councillor,' one of the men said, 'but the news we deliver is bad.'

'Oh? Come now, no more hesitation.'

'Gorlas Vidikas is dead, sir. He was killed in a duel earlier today. We were instructed to ride to his widow first, and hence on to Eldra Iron Mongery. It means we got to go right back the way we come, but the foreman insisted. As a courtesy. As the proper thing to do.'

Shardan Lim simply stared at the man, his thoughts racing.

'Weren't no duel,' growled one of the other men.

'What's that?' Shardan demanded. 'You there, step out.

What did you just say?'

The man was suddenly frightened, but he moved into the councillor's line of sight, managed a quick bow and then said, 'He was assassinated, sir. The foreman kept saying it was all legitimate, but we saw it, sir, with our own eyes. Two knives—'

'Two knives? *Two knives?* Are you certain?'

'Because of the other duel, you see, sir. It was revenge. It was murder. Councillor Vidikas killed another man, then this other one shows up. Then out flash those knives – so fast you couldn't even see 'em, and Councillor Vidikas topples over, stone dead, sir. Stone dead.'

'This is all sounding familiar,' Shardan Lim said. 'Listen to me, you three. One of you, ride to the Orr estate and inform Councillor Hanut Orr. The other two, go on to Eldra, as you will. I will inform Lady Challice. Then, the three of you, find a decent inn for the night and tell the proprietor to treat you well, and to bill House Lim. Go on, now.'

There was some discussion as to who would go where, and which inn they'd rendezvous at when the tasks were done, and then the three men rode off.

Thunder to the south, getting closer. He could hear the wind but it was yet to arrive. Shardan Lim walked up to the gate, pulled on the braided chime in its elongated niche. While he waited for the doorman to arrive, he thought about how he would deliver this grim news. He would need a grave

countenance, something more fitting than the dark grin he was even now fighting.

She was a widow now. Vulnerable. There was no heir. Cousins and half-relations might well creep out of the woodwork, mediocre but grasping with sudden ambition. Proclaiming ascendancy in the Vidikas bloodline and so asserting their newly conceived rights to claim stewardship over the entire House. Without strong allies at her side, she'd be out before the week was done.

Once Hanut Orr heard the report, and gleaned whatever he could from the particular details, his mind would fill with the desire for vengeance – and more than a little fear along with it, Shardan was sure. And he would not even think of Challice, not at first, and the opportunities now present. The next day or two would be crucial, and Shardan would have to move sure and fast to position himself at her side and leave no room for Hanut Orr once the man's own ambitions awakened.

An eye-slot scraped to one side, then closed again with a snap. The gate opened. 'House Vidikas welcomes Councillor Lim,' said the doorman from his low bow, as if addressing Shardan's boots. 'The Lady is being informed of your arrival. If you will kindly follow me.'

And in they went.

She hesitated, facing the wardrobe, studying the array of possible shifts to draw on over her mostly naked body. Most were intended to cover other clothes, as befitted a modest noblewoman engaged in entertaining guests, but the truth was, she couldn't be bothered. She had been about to go to sleep, or at least what passed for sleep of late, lying flat and motionless on her bed.

Alone whether her husband was there or not. Staring upward in the grainy darkness. Where the only things that could stir her upright included another goblet of wine, one more pipe bowl or a ghostly walk in the silent garden.

Those walks always seemed to involve searching for something, an unknown thing, in fact, and she would follow through on the desire even as she knew that what she sought no garden could hold. Whatever it was did

not belong to the night, nor could it be found in the spinning whirls of smoke, or the bite of strong drink on her numbed tongue.

She selected a flowing, diaphanous gown, lavender and wispy as wreaths of incense smoke, pulling it about her bare shoulder. A broad swath of the same material served to gather it tight about her lower torso, beneath her breasts, firm against her stomach and hips. The thin single layer covering her breasts hid nothing.

Shardan Lim was showing his impatience. His crassness. He was even now in the sitting room, sweaty, his eyes dilated with pathetic needs. He was nothing like what he pretended to be, once the façade of sophisticated lechery was plucked aside. The charm, the sly winks, the suave lie.

This entire damned world, she knew, consisted of nothing but thin veneers. The illusion of beauty survived not even a cursory second look. Cheap and squalid, this was the truth of things. He could paint it up all he liked, the stains on the sheets remained.

Barefooted, she set out to meet him. Imagining the whispers of the staff, the maids and servants, the guards – never within range of her hearing, of course. That would not do. Propriety must be maintained at all costs. They'd wait for her to pass, until she was out of sight. It was their right, after all, their reward for a lifetime of servitude, for all that bowing and scraping, for all the gestures meant to convince her and people like her that she was in fact superior to them. The noble bloods, the rich merchants, the famous families and all the rest.

When the truth was, luck and mischance were the only players in the game of success. Privilege of birth, a sudden harmony of forces, a sudden inexplicable balance later seen as a run of good fortune. Oh, they might strut about – *we all might* – and proclaim that talent, skill and cunning were the real players. But Challice held the belief that even the poor, the destitute, the plague-scarred and the beleaguered might possess talents and cunning, only to find their runs of fortune non-existent, proper rewards for ever beyond reach.

Servants bowed, and that they needed to do so was proof of just how flimsy the delusion of superiority was.

She opened the door and walked with dignity into the sitting room. 'Councillor Lim, have you been left here alone? No one to provide you with refreshments? This is unacceptable—'

'I sent her away,' he cut in, and she saw that his expression was strange, conflicted by something but in a most peculiar way.

'You have not even poured yourself some wine. Allow me—'

'No, thank you, Lady Challice. Although, perhaps, I should pour you one. Yes.'

And he went over to select a decanter and then a goblet. She watched the amber wine slosh into the crystal, and then flow over before he righted the decanter. He stared down at the goblet for a moment, and then faced her. 'Lady Challice, I have terrible news.'

*Then why do you struggle so not to smile?* 'Ah. Speak on, then, Councillor.'

He stepped forward. 'Challice—'

All at once, she sensed that something was deeply awry. He was too excited with his news. He was hungry to see its effect on her. He had no interest in using her body this night. And here she had arrived dressed like a fancy whore. 'Forgive me,' she said, stepping back and attempting to draw the shift more modestly about her.

He barely registered the gesture. 'Challice. Gorlas has been murdered. Your husband is dead.'

'Murdered? But he's still out at the mining camp. He's—' and then she stopped, stunned at how disbelief could so swiftly become certainty.

'Assassinated, out at the camp,' Shardan Lim said. 'Was it a contract? I can't imagine who would . . .' And then he too fell silent, and the regard he fixed upon her now was suddenly sharp, piercing.

She could not face the question he looked ready to ask, and so she went to collect the goblet, unmindful of the wine spilling over her hand, and drank deep.

He had moved to one side and still he said nothing as he watched her.

Challice felt light-headed, unbalanced. She was having trouble thinking. Feelings and convictions, which arrived first? Truths and dreads – she was finding it hard to breathe.

'Challice,' Shardan Lim whispered, suddenly standing close. 'There were other ways. You could have come to me. If this comes out, you will hang – do you understand me? It will take your father down – the entire House D'Arle. The whole Council will be rocked to its very foundations. Hood's breath, Challice – if anyone discovers the truth—'

She turned to him and her voice was flat as she said, 'What truth? What are you talking about, Councillor? My husband has been murdered. I expect you and the Council to conduct an investigation. The assassin must be found and punished. Thank you for taking upon yourself the difficult task of informing me. Now, please, leave me, sir.'

He was studying her as if he had never truly seen her before, and then he stepped away and shook his head. 'I'd no idea, Challice. That you were this . . .'

'That I was what, Councillor?'

'It may be . . . ah, that is, you are within your rights to claim the seat on the Council. Or arrange that someone of your own choosing—'

'Councillor Lim, such matters must wait. You are being insensitive. Please, will you now leave?'

'Of course, Lady Challice.'

When he was gone, she stood unmoving, the goblet still in one hand, the spilled wine sticky under her fingers.

A formal investigation. And yes, it would be thorough. Staff would be questioned. Improprieties revealed. Shardan Lim himself . . . yes, it would

be occurring to him about now, as he walked the street, and he might well change his destination – no longer back to his house, but to the Orr estate. To arrange, with growing desperation, the covering of his own tracks.

But none of this affected her. Shardan Lim's fate was meaningless.

She had succeeded. She had achieved precisely what she wanted, the very thing she had begged him to do. For her. For them. But no, for her.

He had killed her husband. Because she had asked him to. And it was now almost certain that he would hang for it. Shardan would talk, pointing the finger so that all eyes shifted away from him, and his accusation would be all fire, blazing with deadly details. And as for her, why, she'd be painted as a foolish young woman. Playing with lowborn but astoundingly ignorant of just how vicious such creatures could be, when something or someone stood in their way. When obsessive love was involved, especially. Oh, she'd been playing, but that nasty young lowborn thug had seen it differently. And now she would have to live with the fact that her idle game had led to her husband's murder. Poor child.

Her father would arrive, because he was the sort of father to do just that. He would raise impenetrable walls around her, and personally defend every portico, every bastion. Aim the knife of innuendo towards her and he would step into its path. He would retaliate, ferociously, and the sly sceptics would quickly learn to keep their mouths shut, if they valued their heads.

She would be the eye of the storm, and feel not even a single drop of rain, nor sigh of wind.

Challice set the goblet down. She walked out into the corridor and proceeded without haste back to her bedroom, where she collected the glass globe with its imprisoned moon. And then left once more, this time to the square tower, with its rooms crowded with antique Gadrobi furniture slowly rotting to dust, with its musty draughts sliding up and down the stairs.

*I have killed him. I have killed him.*

*I have killed him.*

Hanut Orr adjusted his sword-belt and checked his rapier yet again. He had come close to beating the hapless mine guard to glean every last detail of the events surrounding the assassination of Gorlas Vidikas, and he now believed he had a fair idea of the grisly story behind it. The echoes tasted sour, personal. Once he learned where the first man's body had been delivered, he knew where this night would take him.

He assembled his four most capable guards and they set out into the city.

*Two knives to the chest.* Yes, the past never quite went away, did it? Well, finally, he would be able to deliver his long-delayed vengeance. And when he was done there, he would find the one man who was at the centre of all of this. Councillor Coll would not see the dawn.

He dispatched two of his men to Coll's estate. *Watch. Any strangers show up, they don't reach the damned gate. We are at war tonight. Be ready to kill, am I understood?*

Of course he was. These hard men were no fools.

He knew that damned mob in the Phoenix Inn. He knew every one of Coll's decrepit, lowborn friends, and he intended to kill them all.

Down from the Estates District and into the Daru District. Not far.

Two streets from the Phoenix Inn he halted his two remaining men. 'You'll watch the front entrance, Havet. Kust, I want you to walk in and make a show – it won't have to be much, they'll smell you out fast enough. I have the alley, for when somebody bolts. Both of you, keep an eye out for a short, fat man in a red waistcoat. If you get a chance, Havet, cut him down – that shouldn't be hard. There're two tough-looking women who run the place – they're fair targets as well if they head outside. I'm not sure who else will be in that foul nest – we'll find out soon enough. Now, go.'

They went one way. He went another.

Torvald Nom grunted and gasped as he pulled himself on to the estate roof. Sitting at his desk had been driving him mad. He needed to be out, roving round, keeping an eye on everything. On *everything.* This was a terrible night and nothing had happened yet. He missed his wife. He wished he was

back home, and with the coming storm he'd be drenched by the time he stumbled into that blessed, warm abode. Assuming he ever made it.

He worked his way along the edge so that he could see down into the forecourt. And there they were, Madrun and Lazan Door, throwing knuckles against the wall to the left of the main gate. He heard the door of the house open directly beneath him and saw the carpet of light unfold on the steps and pavestones, and the silhouette of the man standing in the doorway was instantly recognizable. Studlock, Studious Lock. Not moving at all, just watching, but watching what?

Knuckles pattered, bounced on stone, then settled, and the two compound guards hunched down over them to study the cast.

*That's what he's watching. He's watching the throws.*

And Torvald Nom saw both men slowly straighten, and turn as one to face the man standing in the doorway.

Who must have stepped back inside, softly closing the door.

*Oh, shit.*

There was a scuffle somewhere behind him and Torvald Nom spun round. It was too damned dark – where was the moon? Hiding somewhere behind the storm clouds, of course, and he glanced up. And saw a sweep of bright stars. *What clouds? There aren't any clouds. And if that's thunder, then where's the lightning? And if that's the howl of wind, why is everything perfectly still?* He wasn't sure now if he'd actually heard anything – nothing was visible on the roof, and there were no real places to hide either. He was alone up here.

*Like a lightning rod.*

He tried a few deep breaths to slow the frantic beat of his heart. At least he'd prepared himself. All his instincts strumming like taut wires, he'd done all he could.

*And it's not enough. Gods below, it's not enough!*

Scorch looked startled, but then he always looked startled.

'Relax,' hissed Leff, 'you're driving me to distraction.'

'Hey, you hear something?'

'No.'

'Exactly.'

'What's that supposed to mean? We ain't hearing nothing. Good. That means there's nothing to hear.'

'They stopped.'

'Who stopped?'

'Them, the ones on the other side of the gate, right? They stopped.'

'Well, thank Hood,' said Leff. 'Those knuckles was driving me crazy. Every damned night, on and on and on. Click clack click clack, gods below. I never knew Seguleh were such gamblers – it's a sickness, you know, an addiction. No wonder they lost their masks – probably in a bet. Picture it. "Ug, got nuffin but this mask, and m'luck's boot to change, 'sgot to, right? So, I'm in – look, 'sa good mask! Ug".'

'That would've been a mistake,' Scorch said, nodding. 'If you don't want nobody to know you're bluffing, what better way than to wear a mask? So, they lost 'em and it's been downhill ever since. Yeah, that makes sense, but it's got me thinking, Leff.'

"Bout what?'

'Well, the Seguleh. Hey, maybe they're *all* bluffing!' Leff nodded back. This was better. Distract the fidgety idiot. All right, maybe things didn't feel quite right. Maybe there was a stink in the air that had nothing to do with smell, and maybe he had sweat trickling down under his armour, and he was keeping his hand close to the sword at his belt and eyeing the crossbow leaning against the gate. Was it cocked? It was cocked.

*Click clack click clack. Come on, boys, start 'em up again, before you start making* me *nervous.*

Cutter halted the horse and sat, leaning forward on the saddle, studying the ship moored alongside the dock. No lights showed. Had Spite gone to bed this early? That seemed unlikely. He hesitated. He wasn't even sure why he had come here. Did he think he'd find Scillara?

That was possible, but if so it was a grotesque desire, revealing an ugly side to his nature that he did not want to examine for very long, if at all. He had pretty much abandoned her. She was a stranger to Darujhistan – he should have done better. He should have been a friend.

How many more lives could he ruin? If justice existed, it was indeed appropriate that he ruin himself as well. The sooner the better, in fact. Grief and self-pity seemed but faint variations on the same heady brew that was self-indulgence – did he really want to drown Scillara in his pathetic tears?

No, Spite would be better – he'd get three words out and she'd start slapping him senseless. *Get over it, Cutter. People die. It wasn't fair, so you put it right. And now you feel like Hood's tongue after a night of slaughter. Live with it. So wipe your nose and get out there. Do something, be someone and stay with it.*

Yes, that was what he needed right now. A cold, cogent regard, a wise absence of patience. In fact, she wouldn't even have to say anything. Just seeing her would do.

He swung down from the saddle and tied the reins to a bollard, then crossed the gangplank to the deck. Various harbour notices had been tacked to the mainmast. Moorage fees and threats of imminent impoundment. Cutter managed a smile, imagining a scene of confrontation in the near future. Delightful to witness, if somewhat alarming, provided he stayed uninvolved.

He made his way below. 'Spite? You here?'

No response. Spirits plunging once more, he tried the door to the main cabin, and found it unlocked. Now, that was strange. Drawing a knife, he edged inside, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Nothing seemed untoward, no signs of disarray – so there had been no roving thief,

which was a relief. As he stepped towards the lantern hanging from a hook, his foot struck something that skidded a fraction.

Cutter looked down.

His lance – the one that dead Seguleh horseman had given him, in that plague-stricken fort in Seven Cities. He recalled seeing it later, strapped to the back of a floating pack amidst wreckage in the waves. He recalled Spite's casual retrieval. He had since stashed the weapon beneath his bunk. So, what was it doing here? And then he noted the beads of what looked like sweat glistening on the iron blade.

Cutter reached down.

The copper sheathing of the shaft was warm, almost hot. Picking the lance up, he realized, with a start, that the weapon was *trembling*. 'Beru fend,' he whispered, 'what is going on here?'

Moments later he was back on the deck, staring over at his horse as the beast tugged at the reins, hoofs stamping the thick tarred boards of the dock. Its ears were flat, and it looked moments from tearing the bollard free – although of course that was impossible. Cutter looked down to find he was still carrying the lance. He wondered at that, but not for long, as he heard a sudden, deafening chorus of howls roll through the city. All along the shoreline, nesting birds exploded upward in shrieking panic, winging into the night.

Cutter stood frozen in place. *The Hounds. They're here.*

Grisp Falaunt had once been a man of vast ambitions. Lord of the single greatest landholding anywhere on the continent, a patriarch of orchards, pastures, groves and fields of corn stretching to the very horizon. Why, the Dwelling Plain was unclaimed, was it not? And so he could claim it, unopposed, unobstructed by prohibitions.

Forty-one years later he woke one morning stunned by a revelation. The Dwelling Plain was unclaimed because it was . . . useless. Lifeless. Pointless. He had spent most of his life trying to conquer something that

was not only unconquerable, but capable of using its very indifference to annihilate every challenger.

He'd lost his first wife. His children had listened to his promises of glorious inheritance and then had simply wandered off, each one terminally unimpressed. He'd lost his second wife. He'd lost three partners and seven investors. He'd lost his capital, his collateral and the shirt on his back – this last indignity courtesy of a crow that had been hanging round the clothes line in a most suspicious manner.

There comes a time when a man must truncate his ambitions, cut them right down, not to what was possible, but to what was manageable. And, as one grew older and more worn down, manageable became a notion blurring with minimal, as in how could a man exist with the minimum of effort? How little was good enough?

He now lived in a shack on the very edge of the Dwelling Plain, offering a suitable view to the south wastes where all his dreams spun in lazy dust-devils through hill and dale and whatnot. And, in the company of a two-legged dog so useless he needed to hand-feed it the rats it was supposed to kill and eat, he tended three rows of root crops, each row barely twenty paces in length. One row suffered a blight of purple fungus; another was infested with grub-worm; and the one between those two had a bit of both.

On this gruesome night with its incessant thunder and invisible lightning and ghost wind, Grisp Falaunt sat rocking on his creaking chair on his back porch, a jug of cactus spit in his lap, a wad of rustleaf bulging one cheek and a wad of durhang the other. He had his free hand under his tunic, as would any man keeping his own company with only a two-legged dog looking on – but the mutt wasn't paying him any attention anyway, which, all things considered, was a rare relief these nights when the beast mostly just stared at him with oddly hungry eyes. No, old Scamper had his eyes on something to the south, out there in the dark plain.

Grisp hitched the jug up on the back of a forearm and tilted in a mouthful of the thick, pungent liquor. Old Gadrobi women in the hills still chewed the spiny blades after hardening the insides of their mouths by eating fire, and spat out the pulp in bowls of water sweetened with virgins' piss. The

mixture was then fermented in sacks of sewn-up sheep intestines buried under dung heaps. And there, in the subtle cascade of flavours that, if he squeezed shut his watering eyes, he could actually taste, one could find the bouquets marking every damned stage in the brewing process. Leading to an explosive, highly volatile cough followed by desperate gasping, and then —

But Scamper there had sharpened up, as much as a two-legged dog could, anyway. Ears perking, seeming to dilate – but no, that was the spit talking – and nape hairs snapping upright in fierce bristle, and there was his ratty, knobby tail, desperately snaking down and under the uneven haunches – and gods below, Scamper was whimpering and crawling, piddling as he went, straight for under the porch – look at the damned thing go! With only two legs, too!

Must be some storm out there—

And, looking up, Grisp saw strange baleful fires floating closer. In sets of two, lifting, weaving, lowering, then back up again. How many sets? He couldn't count. He could have, once, long ago, right up to twenty, but the bad thing about cactus spit was all the parts of the brain it stamped dead underfoot. Seemed that counting and figuring was among them.

Fireballs! Racing straight for him!

Grisp screamed. Or, rather, tried to. Instead, two wads were sucked in quick succession to the back of his throat, and all at once he couldn't breathe, and could only stare as a horde of giant dogs attacked in a thundering charge, straight across his three weepy rows, leaving a churned, uprooted, trampled mess. Two of the beasts made for him, jaws opening. Grisp had rocked on to the two back legs of the chair with that sudden, short-lived gasp, and now all at once he lost his balance, pitching directly backward, legs in the air, even as two sets of enormous jaws snapped shut in the place where his head had been a heartbeat earlier.

His shack erupted behind him, grey shards of wood and dented kitchenware exploding in all directions.

The thumping impact when he hit the porch sent both wads out from his mouth on a column of expelled air from his stunned lungs. The weight of the jug, two fingers still hooked through the lone ear, pulled him sideways and out of the toppled chair on to his stomach, and he lifted his head and saw that his shack was simply gone, and there were the beasts, fast dwindling as they charged towards the city.

Groaning, he lowered his head, settling his forehead on to the slatted boards, and could see through the crack to the crawlspace below, only to find Scamper's two beady eyes staring back up at him in malevolent accusation.

'Fair 'nough,' he whispered. 'Time's come, Scamper old boy, for us to pack up 'n' leave. New pastures, hey? A world before us, just waitin' wi' open arms, just—'

The nearest gate of the city exploded then, the shock wave rolling back to flatten Grisp once more on the floorboards. He heard the porch groan and sag and had one generous thought for poor Scamper – who was scrambling as fast as two legs could take him – before the porch collapsed under him.

Like a dozen bronze bells, hammered so hard they tore loose from their frames and, in falling, dragged the bell towers down around them, the power of the seven Hounds obliterated the gate, the flanking unfinished fortifications, the guard house, the ring-road stable, and two nearby buildings. Crashing blocks of stone, wooden beams, bricks and tiles, crushed furniture and fittings, more than a few pulped bodies in the mix. Clouds of dust, spurts of hissing flame from ruptured gas pipes, the ominous subterranean roar of deadlier eruptions—

Such a sound! Such portentous announcement! The Hounds have arrived, dear friends. Come, yes, come to deliver mayhem, to reap a most senseless toll. Violence can arrive blind, without purpose, like the fist of nature. Cruel in disregard, brutal in its random catastrophe. Like a flash flood, like a tornado, a giant dust-devil, an earthquake – so blind, so senseless, so without intent!

These Hounds . . . they were nothing like that.

Moments before this eruption, Spite, still facing the estate of her venal bitch of a sister, reached a decision. And so she raised her perfectly manicured hands, up before her face, and closed them into fists. Then watched as a deeper blot of darkness formed over the estate, swelling ever larger until blood-red cracks appeared in the vast shapeless manifestation.

In her mind, she was recalling a scene from millennia past, a blasted landscape of enormous craters – the fall of the Crippled God, obliterating what had been a thriving civilization, leaving nothing but ashes and those craters in which magma roiled, spitting noxious gases that swirled high into the air.

The ancient scene was so vivid in her mind that she could scoop out one of those craters, half a mountain's weight of magma, slap it into something like a giant ball, and then position it over the sleepy estate wherein lounged her sleepy, unsuspecting sister. And, now that it was ready, she could just . . . *let go.*

The mass descended in a blur. The estate vanished – as did those nearest to it – and as a wave of scalding heat swept over Spite, followed by a wall of lava thrashing across the street and straight for her, she realized, with a faint squeal, that she too was standing far too close.

Ancient sorceries were messy, difficult to judge, harder yet to control. She'd let her eponymous tendencies affect her judgement. Again.

Undignified flight was the only option for survival, and as she raced up the alley she saw, standing thirty paces ahead, at the passageway's mouth, a figure.

Lady Envy had watched the conjuration at first with curiosity, then admiration, and then awe, and finally in raging jealousy. That spitting cow *always* did things better! Even so, as she watched her twin sister bleating and scrambling mere steps ahead of the gushing lava flow, she allowed herself a most pitiless smile.

Then released a seething wave of magic straight into her sister's slightly prettier face.

Spite never thought ahead. A perennial problem, a permanent flaw – that she hadn't killed herself long ago was due only to Envy's explicit but casual-seeming indifference. But now, if the cow really wanted to take her on, at last, to bring an end to all this, well, that was just dandy.

As her sister's nasty magic engulfed her, Spite did the only thing she could do under the circumstances. She let loose everything she had in a counter-attack. Power roared out from her, clashed and then warred with Envy's own.

They stood, not twenty paces apart, and the space between them raged like the heart of a volcano. Cobbles blistered bright red and melted away. Stone and brick walls rippled and sagged. Faint voices shrieked. Slate tiles pitched down into the maelstrom as roofs tilted hard over on both sides.

Needless to say, neither woman heard a distant gate disintegrate, nor saw the fireball that followed, billowing high into the night. They did not even feel the thunderous reverberations rippling out beneath the streets, the ones that came from the concussions of subterranean gas chambers igniting one after another.

No, Spite and Envy had other things on their minds.

There could be no disguising a sudden rush to the estate gate by a dozen black-clad assassins. As five figures appeared from an alley mouth directly opposite Scorch and Leff, three others, perched on the rooftop of the civic building to the right of the alley, sent quarrels hissing towards the two lone guards. The remaining four, two to a side, sprinted in from the flanks.

The facing attack had made itself known a moment too soon, and both Scorch and Leff had begun moving by the time the quarrels arrived. This lack of coordination could be viewed as inevitable given the scant training these assassins possessed, since this group was, in fact, little more than a diversion, and thus comprised the least capable individuals among the attackers.

One quarrel glanced off Leff's helm. Another was deflected by Scorch's chain hauberk, although the blow, impacting his left shoulder blade, sent him stumbling.

The third quarrel exploded in stone. The sky to the west lit up momentarily, and the cobbles shook as Leff reached his crossbow, managed a skidding turn and loosed the quarrel into the crowd of killers fast closing.

A bellow of pain and one figure tumbled, weapons skittering.

Scorch scrabbled for his own crossbow, but it looked to Leff as if he would not ready it in time, and so with a shout he drew his shortsword and leapt into the path of the attackers.

Scorch surprised him, as a quarrel sped past to thud deep into a man's chest, punching him back and fouling up the assassin behind him. Leff shifted direction and went in on that side, slashing with his sword at the tangled figure – a thick, heavyset woman – and feeling the edge bite flesh and then bone.

Shapes darted in on his left – but all at once Scorch was there.

Things got a bit hot then.

Torvald Nom was looking for a way down when the tiles beneath his boots trembled to the sounds of running feet. He spun round to find four figures charging towards him. Clearly, they had not been expecting to find anyone up here, since none carried crossbows. In the moment before they reached him, he saw in their hands knives, knotted clubs and braided saps.

The nearest one wobbled suddenly – a bolt was buried deep in his right temple – and then fell in a sprawl.

Torvald threw himself to one side and rolled – straight over the roof edge. Not quite what he had planned, and he desperately twisted as he fell, knowing that it wouldn't help in the least.

He had tucked into his belt two Blue Moranth sharpers.

Torvald could only close his eyes as he pounded hard on to the pavestones. The impact threw him back upward on a rising wave of stunning pain, but the motion seemed strangely slow, and he opened his eyes – amazed that he still lived – only to find that the world had turned into swirling green and blue clouds, thick, wet.

No, not clouds. He was inside a bulging, sloshing sphere of water. Hanging suspended now, as it rolled, taking him with it, out into the courtyard.

Looking up at the rooftop as the misshapen globe tumbled him over and over, he saw an assassin pitch over the edge in a black spray of blood – and then he was looking at Madrun and Lazan Door, wielding two curved swords each, cutting through a mob that even now scattered in panic.

At that moment sorcery lit up the courtyard, rolling in a spitting, raging wave that swept up the main building's front steps and collided with the door, shattering it and the lintel above. Clouds of dust tumbled out, and three vague shapes rushed in, disappearing inside the house. A fourth one skidded to a halt at the base of the cracked steps, spun round and raised gloved hands. More magic, shrieking as it darted straight for the two unmasked Seguleh and those few assassins still standing. The impact sent bodies flying.

Torvald Nom, witnessing all this through murky water and discovering a sudden need to breathe, lost sight of everything as the globe heaved over one last time, even as he heard water draining, splashing down out to the sides, and watched the blurred pavestones beneath him draw closer.

All at once he found himself lying on the courtyard, drenched, gasping for air. He rolled over on to his back, saw a spark-lit, fiery black cloud tumble through the sky directly overhead – and that was curious, wasn't it?

Detonations from within the estate. A sudden scream, cut bloodily short. He looked over to where Lazan Door and Madrun had been. Bodies crowded up against the inside wall, like a handful of black knuckles, and their bouncing, skidding journey was at an end, every knuckle settled and motionless.

Someone was approaching. Slow, steady steps, coming to a rest beside him.

Blinking, Torvald Nom looked up. 'Cousin! Listen! I'm sorry, all right? I never meant it, honest!'

'What in Hood's name are you going on about, Tor?' Rallick Nom was wiping blood from his tjaluk knives. 'I'd swear you were scared of me or something.'

'I didn't mean to steal her, Rallick. That's no lie!'

'Tiserra?'

Torvald stared up at his cousin, wide-eyed, his heart bounding like an antelope with a hundred starving wolves on its stumpy tail.

Rallick made a face. 'Tor, you idiot. We were what, seven years old? Sure, I thought she was cute, but gods below, man, any boy and girl who start holding hands at seven and are still madly in love with each other twenty-five years later – that's not something to mess with—'

'But I saw the way you looked at us, year after year – I couldn't stand it, I couldn't sleep, I knew you'd come for me sooner or later, I knew . . .'

Rallick frowned down at him. 'Torvald, what you saw in my face was envy. Yes, such a thing can get ugly, but not with me. I watched in wonder, in admiration. Dammit, I loved you both. Still do.' He sheathed his weapons and reached down with a red-stained hand. 'Good to see you, cousin. Finally.'

Torvald took that hand, and suddenly – years of guilt and fear shedding away – the whole world was all right. He was pulled effortlessly to his feet. 'Hang on,' he said, 'what are you doing here?'

'Helping out, of course.'

'Taking care of me—'

'Ah, that was incidental, in truth. I saw you on the rooftop earlier. There'd be a few trying that way. Anyway, you did a nice job of catching their attention.'

'That quarrel through that one's head was from you?'

'At that range, I never miss.'

They turned then as Studious Lock, limping, emerged from the wreckage of the main entrance. And behind him strode the Lady of the house. She was wearing leather gloves that ran up to the elbow on which dagger-sheaths had been riveted. Her usual voluminous silks and linens had been replaced by tight-fitting fighting clothes. Torvald squinted thoughtfully.

Studious Lock was making his way towards the heap of bodies.

Lady Varada saw Rallick and Torvald and approached.

Rallick bowed. 'Did the mage give you any trouble, Mistress?'

'No. Is the rooftop clear?'

'Of course.'

'And Seba?'

'Probably scampering for his warren as fast as his legs can take him.' Rallick paused. 'Mistress, you could walk back in—'

'And who is left in my Guild, Rallick? Of any worth, I mean.'

'Krute, perhaps. Myself. Even Seba would manage, so long as he was responsible for a single cell and nothing more.'

Torvald was no fool, and as he followed this conversation, certain things fell into place. 'Lady Varada,' he said. 'Er, Mistress Vorcan, I mean. You knew this was coming, didn't you? And you probably hired me, and Scorch and Leff, because you believed we were useless, and, er, expendable. You wanted them to get through – you wanted them all in here, so you could wipe them out once and for all.'

She regarded him for a moment, one eyebrow lifting, and then turned away and headed back to her house.

Torvald made to pursue her but Rallick reached out a hand and held him back. 'Cousin,' he said in a low voice, 'she was Mistress of the Assassins' Guild. Do you think she's anything like us? Do you really think she gives a damn if we live or die?'

Torvald glanced over at Rallick. 'Now who's the fool, cousin? No, you're right, about me and Scorch and Leff – and those fallen Seguleh over there – she doesn't care. But you, Rallick, that's different. Are you blind? Soon as she stepped out, her eyes went to you, and all the stiffness relaxed, and she came over to make sure you weren't wounded.'

'You can't be serious.'

'And you can't be so stupid, can you?'

At that moment the main gates crashed open and two bloody figures staggered in.

'We was attacked!' Scorch shouted in outrage.

'We killed 'em all,' Leff added, looking round wildly, 'but there could be more!'

Torvald noted his cousin's expression and softly laughed, drawing Rallick's attention once more. 'I got some wine in my office,' Torvald said. 'We can sit and relax and I can tell you some things about Scorch and Leff —' 'This is not the night for that, Tor – are you deaf?'

Torvald scowled, then thumped at the side of his head. Both sides. 'Sorry, got water in my ears. Even you here, you sound to me like you're under a bucket.'

The thumping worked, at least for one ear, and he could hear now what everyone else was listening to.

Screams, all through the city. Buildings crashing down. Echoing howls. Recalling the fireball he'd seen, he looked skyward. No stars in sight – the sky was filled with smoke, huge bulges underlit by wildfires in the city. 'Gods below!'

Harllo ran down the road. His knees were cut and deeply scored by his climb up the slope of scree, and blood ran down his shins. Stitches bit into his sides and every muscle was on fire. And Venaz was so close behind him that he could hear his harsh gasps – but Venaz was older, his legs were longer, and it would be soon now, no matter how tired he sounded.

To have come so far, and everything was about to end . . . but Harllo would not weep. Would not plead or beg for his life. Venaz was going to beat him to death. It was as simple as that. There was no Bainisk to stand in the way, there were no rules of the camp. Harllo was not a mole any more; he was of no use to anyone.

People like him, big and small, died all the time. Killed by being ignored, killed because nobody cared what happened to them. He'd walked the streets of Darujhistan often enough to see for himself, to see that the only thing between those huddled shapes and himself was a family that didn't even want him, no matter how hard he worked. They were Snell's parents, and Snell was what they'd made between them, and nothing in the world could cut through those tethers.

That was why they let Snell play with Harllo, and if he played using fists and feet and something went bad, well, that stuff happened all the time, didn't it? That's why they never came to get him. And the one man who did, Gruntle, who always looked down at him with sad eyes, he was dead now, too, and it was this fact that eased Harllo's mind. He was happy to go where Gruntle had gone. He would take hold of that giant scarred hand and know that, finally, he was safe.

'I got you! I got you!'

A hand snagged at the back of his shirt, missed.

Harllo threw himself forward – maybe one last spurt – away, fast as he could—

The hand caught a handful of tunic, and Harllo stumbled, and then a thin sweaty arm wrapped tight round his neck, lifting him from his feet.

The forearm pressed against his throat. He could not breathe. And all at once Harllo did not want to die.

He flailed, but Venaz was too big, too strong.

Harllo was forced down to the stony surface of the road, then pushed over on his back as Venaz straddled him and closed both hands round his neck.

The face glaring down at him was flushed with triumph. Sweat ran muddy streaks down it; something had cut one cheek and white threads of cave-worms clustered round the wound – they'd lay eggs and that cut would become a huge welt, until it burst and the grubs crawled out, and the scar left behind would never go away and Venaz would be ugly for the rest of his life.

'Got you got you got you,' Venaz whispered, his eyes bright. 'And now you die. Now you die. Got you and now you die.'

Those hands squeezed with savage strength.

He fought, he scratched, he kicked, but it was hopeless. He felt his face swell, grow hot. The darkness flushed red.

Something cracked hard and Venaz was reeling back, his grip torn loose. Hands closed on Harllo's upper arms and dragged him a short distance away. Gasping, he stared up at a strange face – another boy – who now stepped past him, advancing on Venaz.

Who had scrambled upright, nose streaming blood.

'Who the shit are—'

The stranger flung himself at Venaz, and both went down.

Coughing, tears streaming, Harllo forced himself on to his hands and knees. The two boys were about the same size, and they were of that age when a real fight had a deadly edge. They fought as would rabid dogs. Clawing into faces, seeking eye sockets, or inside the mouth to tear aside one entire cheek. They bit, gouged, used their elbows and knees as they rolled about on the roadside.

Something snapped, like a green sapling, and someone howled in terrible pain.

Harllo climbed to his feet, and he found he was holding a large round stone in his hands.

Venaz had broken the stranger's left arm, and he was now working himself on top, fists raining down into the other boy's face – who did what

he could to protect it with his one working arm, but half of those fists got through, smashing into the face beneath.

Harllo stepped up behind Venaz, who was straddling the stranger. He looked down, seeing him as the stranger must have done when Harllo was the one lying on the ground, being murdered. He raised the rock, and then drove it down on to the top of Venaz's skull.

The impact made him lose his grip on the stone and he saw it roll off to one side, leaving a shallow dent in Venaz's head.

Venaz seemed to be in the midst of a coughing fit, a barely human stuttering sound bursting from his throat. He pushed himself off the other boy and rose wobbling to his feet. When he turned to stare at Harllo, he was smiling, the teeth bright shards between gushing streams of blood from his nose. His eyes had filled and were now opaque. He lost his balance and reeled to one side, only to lose his footing on the edge of the road and plunge into the grassy ditch.

Harllo went to stare down at him. Venaz was still smiling, lying on his back, his cut and bruised hands making strange circular motions. He had soiled himself and the stench made Harllo step back, away, to walk over and kneel down beside the other boy.

Who was sitting up, cradling his broken arm, hair hanging over his face.

'Hello,' said Harllo, 'who are you?'

Hanut Orr stood in the shadows behind the Phoenix Inn, waiting for the first of the cowardly bastards to come rushing out from the kitchen door. His man must be inside by now, stirring things up. Not long, then.

He ducked at the sound of ferocious howls echoing through the city, and then a thundering concussion somewhere to the south – but close – and he stepped out to the centre of the alley. Some shambling figure walking past had to shift quickly to one side to avoid colliding with him.

'Watch it,' Hanut snapped, and then he looked up into the slash of night visible between the buildings, as it suddenly lit red and orange.

It was pretty much the last thing he ever saw.

As soon as he was past the fool, Gaz whirled round, his right fingerless hand lashing out to crack with a crunch against the base of his victim's neck. Bone against bone, and it was not knuckles that broke – they were by now too scarred, too calcined, for that. No, what snapped was Hanut Orr's neck.

Gaz was swinging with his other hand even as the body crumpled, his left pounding into the man's forehead, flinging the head back like a bulbous seed pod on a broken stalk. Slap went the body, head bouncing once and then lolling way too far to one side.

He stared down, and then moaned. This was no drunk who'd been leaning against a wall behind the inn. He should have noted the man's tone when he'd warned him off.

This was a highborn.

Gaz found he was breathing fast. A rapid pounding in his chest, a sudden heat flooding through him. His knuckles throbbed.

'Thordy,' he whispered, 'I'm in deep trouble. *Thordyyyy . . .*'

He looked up and down the alley, saw no one, and then set off, stiff-legged, leaning far forward, his fingerless hands drawn up under his chin. He was going home. Yes, he had to get home, and be there all night, yes, he'd been there all night—

*In trouble in trouble I'm in trouble now. Mages and necromancers, guards everywhere – listen to the alarms – they've found him already! Oh oh oh trouble, Thordy, so much trouble . . .*

Councillor Coll had pushed him back on to the bar, then down on to its battered surface. The severe arch forced by the position had Hanut Orr's thug groaning in pain.

'Is he waiting, then?' Coll asked, leaning close. 'Your shitface boss – is he waiting outside?'

The man understood loyalty, and he understood the demands of raw survival, and of course there was no contest between the two. He managed a nod and gasped, 'Alley. He's in the alley. There's another man, other side of the street out front.'

'And who are you all looking for?'

'Any – uh – any one of you. No, wait. The assassin, the one with the two knives – the one who just killed Gorlas Vidikas.'

The man saw Coll's broad, oddly puffy face twist into a frown, and the heavy weight pressing down on his chest – keeping him pinned on the countertop – eased back.

'Meese, this one moves, kill him.'

The woman with the absurd two-handed mace stepped up, eyes flat and lifeless as they fixed on the thug. 'Give me a reason,' she said.

The thug simply shook his head and stayed right where he was, leaning now against the rail.

He watched as Coll shambled over to where stood the short, round man in the red waistcoat. They spoke for a time, in tones so low the man had no chance of overhearing their conversation. And then Coll went behind the bar and emerged a moment later with an antique broadsword that looked like a perfect fit in those huge hands. Trailed by the fat man, he marched out into the kitchen, presumably for the back door.

Well, Hanut Orr was an arrogant tyrant. So he got what he wanted and a whole lot more. Things like that happen.

The man suddenly recalled that he'd spilled nothing about the two men waiting outside Coll's estate. Well, this could work out just fine, so long as he managed to get out of this damned inn before Coll got ambushed at his gate.

Damned noisy in the city tonight – ah, yes, the last night of the Gedderone Fête. Of course it was noisy, and dammit, he wanted to be out there himself,

partying, dancing, squeezing soft flesh, maybe picking a fight or two – but ones he could win, of course. Nothing like this crap—

All at once Coll and the fat man were back, both looking confused.

'Sulty dear,' sang out the fat man, and one of the serving wenches looked over – they all had themselves a quiet, nervous audience among the half-dozen others in the tavern, and so numerous sets of eyes watched as she headed over. She was just rounding the nearest table when the fat man said, 'It would appear that Hanut Orr has met an untimely end – before we even arrived, alas for Coll's sake. Best summon a guard—'

She made a face. 'What? Out there? In the damned streets? Sounds like ten thousand wolves have been let loose out there, Kruppe!'

'Sweet Sulty, Kruppe assures you no harm will come to you! Kruppe assures, yes, and will warmly comfort too upon your triumphant return!'

'Oh now that's incentive,' and she turned round and headed for the front door. And the man was close enough to hear her add under her breath, 'Incentive to throw myself into the jaws of the first wolf I see . . .'

But out she went.

The guard with the loving family and the aching chest was at the intersection just on this side of the wall one street away from the Phoenix Inn – and hurrying with genuine alarm towards the sounds of destruction to the south (the other raging fire in the Estate District was not his jurisdiction) – when he heard someone shouting at him and so turned, lifting high his lantern.

A young woman was waving frantically.

He hesitated, and then flinched at a howl so loud and so close he expected to see a demon standing at his shoulder. He jogged towards the woman.

'For Hood's sake!' he shouted. 'Get yourself inside!'

He saw her spin round and scamper for the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. As he drew closer a flash of motion from a facing alley mouth almost drew

him round, but when he shot the bull's eye in that direction, he saw no one. He hurried on, breathing hard as he climbed the steps and went inside.

A short time and a tumble of words later, he followed Councillor Coll and Kruppe into the alley, where they gathered round the corpse of yet another councillor. Hanut Orr, apparently.

Wincing at the tightness that was closing like a vice round his ribcage, the guard slowly squatted to examine the wounds. Only two blows – which didn't sound like his man – but then, the look of those wounds . . . 'I think he's killed another one,' he muttered. 'Not long ago either.' He looked up. 'And you two saw nothing?'

Coll shook his head.

Kruppe – a man the guard had always regarded askance, with considerable suspicion, in fact – hesitated.

'What? Speak, you damned thief.'

'Thief? Aaii, such an insult! Kruppe was but observing with most sharp eye the nature of said wounds upon forehead and back of neck.'

'That's how I know it's the same man as has been killing dozens over the last few months. Some kind of foreign weapon—'

'Foreign? Not at all, Kruppe suggests. Not at all.'

'Really? Do go on.'

'Kruppe suggests, most vigilant and honourable guard, that 'twas hands alone did this damage. Knuckles and no more, no less.'

'No, that's wrong. I've seen the marks a fist makes—'

'But Kruppe did not say "fist". Kruppe was being more precise. Knuckles, yes? As in knuckles unencumbered by fingers . . .'

The guard frowned, and then looked once more at that bizarre elongated dent in Hanut Orr's forehead. He suddenly straightened. 'Knuckles . . . but no fingers. But . . . I know that man!'

'Indeed?' Kruppe beamed. 'Best make haste then, friend, and beware on this night of all nights, do beware.'

'What? Beware what – what are you talking about?'

'Why, the Toll, friend. Beware the Toll. Now go quickly – we shall take this poor body inside, until the morning when proper arrangements are, er, arranged. Such a multitude of sorrows this night! Go, friend, hunt down your nemesis! This is the very night for such a thing!'

Everything was pulsing in front of the guard's eyes, and the pain had surged from his chest into his skull. He was finding it hard to so much as think. But . . . yes, he knew that man. Gods, what was his name?

It would come to him, but for now he hurried down the alley, and out into yet another bizarrely empty street. The name would come to him, but he knew where the bastard lived, he knew that much and wasn't that enough for now? It was.

Throbbing, pounding pulses rocked the brain in his skull. Flashes of orange light, flushes of dry heat against his face – gods, he wasn't feeling right, not right at all. There was an old cutter down the street from where he lived – after tonight, he should pay her a visit. Lances of agony along his limbs, but he wasn't going to stop, not even for a rest.

He had the killer. Finally. Nothing was going to get in his way.

And so onward he stumbled, lantern swinging wildly.

Gaz marched up to the door, pushed it open and halted, looking round. The stupid woman hadn't even lit the hearth – where the fuck was she? He made his way across the single room, three strides in all, to the back door, which he kicked open.

Sure enough, there she was, standing with her back to him, right there in front of that circle of flat stones she'd spent days and nights arranging and rearranging. As if she'd lost her mind, and the look in her eyes of late – well, they were in so much trouble now.

'Thordy!'

She didn't even turn round, simply said, 'Come over here, husband.'

'Thordy, there's trouble. I messed up. We messed up – we got to think – we got to get out of here, out of the city – we got to run—'

'We're not running,' she said.

He came up beside her. 'Listen, you stupid woman—' She casually raised an arm and slid something cold and biting across his throat. Gaz stared, reached up his battered, maimed hands, and felt hot blood streaming down from his neck. 'Thordy?' The word bubbled as it came out.

Gaz fell to his knees, and she stepped up behind him and with a gentle push sent him sprawling face down on to the circle of flat stones.

'You were a good soldier,' she said. 'Collecting up so many lives.'

He was getting cold, icy cold. He tried to work his way back up, but there was no strength left in him, none at all.

'And me,' she went on, 'I've been good too. The dreams – he made it all so simple, so obvious. I've been a good mason, husband, getting it all ready . . . for you. For him.'

The ice filling Gaz seemed to suddenly reach in, as deep inside him as it was possible to go, and he felt something – something that was his, and his alone, something that called itself *me* – convulse and then shriek in terror and anguish as the cold devoured it, ate into it, and piece after piece of his life simply vanished, piece after piece after—

Thordy dropped the knife and stepped back as Hood, the Lord of Death, High King of the House of the Slain, Embracer of the Fallen, began to physically manifest on the stone dais before her. Tall, swathed in rotting robes of muted green, brown, and black. The face was hidden but the eyes were dull slits faintly lit in the midst of blackness, as was the smeared gleam of yellow tusks.

Hood now stood on the blood-splashed stones, in a decrepit garden in the district of Gadrobi, in the city of Darujhistan. Not a ghostly projection, not hidden behind veils of shielding powers, not even a spiritual visitation.

No, this was *Hood, the god*.

Here, now.

And in the city on all sides, the howling of the Hounds rose in an ear-shattering, soul-flailing crescendo.

The Lord of Death had arrived, to walk the streets in the City of Blue Fire.

The guard came on to the decrepit street facing the ramshackle house that was home to the serial murderer, but he could barely make it out through the pulsing waves of darkness that seemed to be closing in on all sides, faster and faster, as if he was witness to a savage, nightmarish compression of time, day hurtling into night into day and on and on. As if he was somehow rushing into his own old age, right up to his final mortal moment. A roaring sound filled his head, excruciating pain radiating out from his chest, burning with fire in his arms, the side of his neck. His jaws were clenched so tight he was crushing his own teeth, and every breath was agony.

He made it halfway to the front door before falling to his knees, doubling up and sinking down on to his side, the lantern clunking as it struck the cobbles. And suddenly he had room for a thousand thoughts, all the time he could have wanted, now that he'd taken his last breath. So many things became clear, simple, acquiring a purity that lifted him clear of his body—

And he saw, as he hovered above his corpse, that a figure had emerged from the killer's house. His altered vision revealed every detail of that ancient, unhuman visage within the hood, the deep-etched lines, the ravaged map of countless centuries. Tusks rising from the lower jaw, chipped and worn, the tips ragged and splintered. And the eyes – *so cold, so . . . haunted* – all at once the guard knew this apparition.

Hood. The Lord of Death had come for him.

He watched as the god lifted his gaze, fixing him with those terrible eyes.

And a voice spoke in his head, a heavy voice, like the grinding of massive stones, the sinking of mountains. 'I have thought nothing of justice. For so

long now. It is all one to me. Grief is tasteless, sorrow an empty sigh. Live an eternity in dust and ashes and then speak to me of justice.'

To this the guard had nothing to say. He had been arguing with death night after night. He had been fighting all the way from the Phoenix Inn. Every damned step. He was past that now.

'So,' continued Hood, 'here I stand. And the air surrounding me, the air rushing into my lungs, it lives. I cannot prevent what comes with my every step here in the mortal world. I cannot be other than what I am.'

The guard was confused. Was the Lord of Death *apologizing*?

'But this once, I shall have my way. *I shall have my way.'* And he stepped forward, raising one withered hand – a hand, the guard saw, missing two fingers. 'Your soul shines. It is bright. Blinding. So much honour, so much love. Compassion. In the cavern of loss you leave behind, your children will be less than all they could have been. They will curl round scars and the wounds will never quite heal, and they will learn to gnaw those scars, to lick, to drink deep. This will not do.'

The guard convulsed, spinning down back into the corpse on the cobbles. He felt his heart lurch, and then pound with sudden ease, sudden, stunning vigour. He drew a deep breath, the air wondrous, cool, sweeping away the last vestige of pain – sweeping everything away.

All that he had come to, in those last moments – that scintillating clarity of vision, the breathtaking understanding of *everything* – now sank beneath a familiar cloud, settling grey and thick, where every shape was but hinted at, where he was lost. As lost as he had been, as lost as any and every mortal soul, no matter how blustery its claims to certainty, to faith. And yet . . . and yet *it was a warm cloud*, shot through with precious things: his love for his wife, his children; his wonder at their lives, the changes that came to them day by day.

He found he was weeping, even as he climbed to his feet. He turned to look at the Lord of Death, in truth not expecting to see the apparition which must surely come only to the dead and dying, and then cried out in shock.

Hood looked solid, appallingly real, walking down the street, eastward, and it was as if the webs binding them then stretched, the fabric snapping, wisping off into the night, and with each stride that took the god farther away the guard felt his life returning, an awareness of breathtaking solidity – in this precise moment, and in every one that would follow.

He turned away – and even that was easy – and settled his gaze upon the door, which hung open, and all that waited within was dark and rotted through with horror and madness.

The guard did not hesitate.

With this modest and humble man, with this courageous, honourable man, Hood saw true. And, for just this once, the Lord of Death had permitted himself to care.

Mark this, a most significant moment, a most poignant gesture.

Thordy heard boots on the warped floorboards of the back porch and she turned to see a city guardsman emerge from her house, out through the back door, holding a lantern in one hand.

'He is dead,' she said. 'The one you have come here for. Gaz, my husband.' She pointed with a blood-slick knife. 'Here.'

The guard walked closer, sliding back one of the shutters on the lantern and directing the shaft of light until it found and held on the motionless body lying on the stones.

'He confessed,' she said. 'So I killed him, with my own hand. I killed this . . . monster.'

The guardsman crouched down to study the corpse. He reached out and gently slipped one finger under the cuff of one of Gaz's sleeves, and raised up the battered, fingerless hand. He sighed then, and slowly nodded.

As he lowered the arm again and began straightening, Thordy said, 'I understand there is a reward.'

He looked across at her.

She wasn't sure what she saw in his expression. He might be horrified, or amused, or cynically drained of anything like surprise. But it didn't matter much. She just wanted the money. She needed the money.

Becoming, for a time, the mason of the Lord of the Slain entailed a fearsome responsibility. But she hadn't seen a single bent copper for her troubles.

The guardsman nodded. 'There is.'

She held up the kitchen knife.

He might have flinched a bit, maybe, but what mattered now would be Thordy seeing him nod a second time.

And after a moment, he did just that.

A god walked the streets of Darujhistan. In itself, never a good thing. Only fools would happily, eagerly invite such a visitation, and such enthusiasm usually proved shortlived. That this particular god was the harvester of souls meant that, well, not only was his manifestation unwelcome, but his gift amounted to unmitigated slaughter, rippling out to overwhelm thousands of inhabitants in tenement blocks, in the clustered hovels of the Gadrobi District, in the Lakefront District – but no, such things cannot be glanced over with a mere shudder.

Plunge then, courage collected, into this welter of lives. Open the mind to consider, cold or hot, all manner of judgement. Propriety is dispensed with, decency cast aside. This is the eye that does not blink, but is such steely regard an invitation to cruel indifference? To a hardened, compassionless aspect? Or will a sliver of honest empathy work its way beneath the armour of desensitized excess? When all is done, dare to weigh thine own harvest of feelings and consider this one challenge: if all was met with but a callous shrug, then, this round man invites, shift round such cruel, cold regard, and cast one last judgement. Upon thyself.

But for now . . . *witness.*

*Skilles Naver was about to murder his family. He had been walking home from Gajjet's Bar, belly filled with ale, only to have a dog the size of a horse*

*step out in front of him. A blood-splashed muzzle, eyes burning with bestial fire, the huge flattened head swinging round in his direction.*

*He had frozen in place. He had pissed himself, and then shat himself.*

*A moment later a high wooden fence surrounding a vacant lot further up the street – where a whole family had died of some nasty fever a month earlier – suddenly collapsed and a second enormous dog appeared, this one bone white.*

*Its arrival snatched the attention of the first beast, and in a surge of muscles the creature lunged straight for it.*

*They collided like two runaway, laden wagons, the impact a concussion that staggered Skilles. Whimpering, he turned and ran.*

*And ran.*

*And now he was home, stinking like a slop pail, and his wife was but half packed – caught in the midst of a treacherous flight, stealing the boys, too. His boys. His little workers, who did everything Skilles told them to (and Beru fend if they didn't or even talked back, the little shits) and the thought of a life without them – without his perfect, private, very own slaves – lit Skilles into a white rage.*

*His wife saw what was coming. She pushed the boys into the corridor and then turned to give up her own life. Besk the neighbour the door next over was collecting the boys for some kind of escape to who knew where. Well, Skilles would just have to hunt him down, wouldn't he? It wasn't as if puny rat-faced Surna was going to hold him back for long, was it?*

*Just grab her, twist that scrawny neck and toss the waste of space to one side—*

*He didn't even see the knife, and all he felt of the murderous stab was a prick under his chin, as the thin blade shot up through his mouth, deflected inward by his upper palate, and sank three fingers deep straight into the base of his brain.*

*Surna and her boys didn't have to run after all.*

*Kanz was nine years old and he loved teasing his sister who had a real temper, as Ma always said as she picked up pieces of broken crockery and bits of hated vegetables scattered all over the floor, and the best thing was prodding his sister in the ribs when she wasn't looking, and she'd spin round, eyes flashing with fury and hate – and off he'd run, with her right on his heels, out into the corridor, pell-mell straight to the stairs and then down and round and down fast as he could go with her screeching behind him.*

*Down and round and down and—*

*—and he was flying through the air. He'd tripped, missed his grip on the rail, and the ground floor far below rushed up to meet him.*

*'You two will be the death of each other!' Ma always said. Zasperating! She said that too—*

*He struck the floor. Game over.*

*Sister's quick temper went away and never returned after that night. And Ma never again voiced the word 'zasperating'. Of course it did not occur to her that its sudden vanishing from her mind was because her little boy had taken it with him, the last word he'd thought. He'd taken it, as would a toddler a doll, or a blanket. For comfort in his dark new world.*

*Benuck Fill sat watching his mother wasting away. Some kind of cancer was eating her up inside. She'd stopped talking, stopped wanting anything; she was like a sack of sticks when he picked her up to carry her to the washtub to wipe down all the runny stuff she leaked out these days, these nights. Her smile, which had told him so much of her love for him, and her shame at what she had become – that horrible loss of dignity – had changed now into something else: an open mouth, lips withered and folded in, each breath a wheezing gasp. If that was a smile then she was smiling at death itself and that was hard for him to bear. Seeing that. Understanding it, what it meant.*

*Not long now. And Benuck didn't know what he would do. She had given him life. She had fed him, held him, kept him warm. She had given him words to live by, rules to help him shape his life, his self. She wasn't clever,*

*very, or even wise. She was just an average person, who worked hard so that they could live, and worked even harder when Da went to fight in Pale where he probably died though they never found out either way. He just never came back.*

*Benuck sat wringing his hands, listening to her breathing, wishing he could help her, fill her with his own breath, fill her right up so she could rest, so she'd have a single, final moment when she didn't suffer, one last moment of painless life, and then she could let go . . .*

*But here, unseen by any, was the real truth. His mother had died eight days ago. He sat facing an empty chair, and whatever had broken in his mind had trapped him now in those last days and nights. Watching, washing, dressing. Things to do for her, moments of desperate care and love, and then back to the watching and there was no light left in her eyes and she made no sign she heard a thing he said, all his words of love, his words of thanks.*

*Trapped. Lost. Not eating, not doing anything at all. Hood's hand brushed his brow then and he slumped forward in his chair, and the soul of his mother, that had been hovering in anguish in this dreadful room all this time, now slipped forward for an eternal embrace.*

*Sometimes, the notion of true salvation can start the eyes.*

*Avab Tenitt fantasized about having children with him in his bed. Hadn't happened yet, but soon he would make it all real. In the meantime he liked tying a rope round his neck, a damned noose, in fact, while he masturbated under the blankets while his unsuspecting wife scrubbed dishes in the kitchen.*

*Tonight, the knot snagged and wouldn't loosen. In fact, it just got tighter and tighter the more he struggled with it, and so as he spilled out, so did his life.*

*When his wife came into the room, exhausted, her hands red and cracked by domestic travails, and on her tongue yet another lashing pending for her wastrel husband, she stopped and stared. At the noose. The bloated, blue*

*and grey face above it, barely recognizable, and it was as if a thousand bars of lead had been lifted from her shoulders.*

*Let the dogs howl outside all night. Let the fires rage. She was free and her life ahead was all her own and nobody else's. For ever and ever again.*

*A week later a neighbour would see her pass on the street and would say to friends that evening how Nissala had suddenly become beautiful, stunning, in fact, filled with vitality, looking years and years younger. Like a dead flower suddenly reborn, a blossom fierce under the brilliant warm sunlight.*

*And then the two gossipy old women would fall silent, both thinking the same dark thoughts, the delicious what-if and maybe-she notions that made life so much fun, and gave them plenty to talk about, besides.*

*In the meantime, scores of children would stay innocent for a little longer than they would have otherwise done.*

*Widow Lebbil was a reasonable woman most of the time. But on occasion this gentle calm twisted into something malign, something so bound up in rage that it overwhelmed its cause. The same thing triggered her incandescent fury, the same thing every time.*

*Fat Saborgan lived above her, and around this time every night – when decent people should be sleeping though truth be told who could do that on this insane night when the mad revelry in the streets sounded out of control – he'd start running about up there, back and forth, round and round, this way and that.*

*Who could sleep below that thunder?*

*And so she worked her way out of bed, groaning at her aching hips, took one of her canes and, standing on a rickety chair, pounded against the ceiling. Her voice was too thin, too frail – he'd never hear if she yelled up at him. Only the cane would do. And she knew he heard her, she knew he did, but did it make any difference?*

*No! Never!*

*She couldn't go on with this. She couldn't!*

*Thump thump scrape thump scrape thump thump – and so she pounded and pounded and pounded, her arms on fire, her shoulders cramping. Pounded and pounded.*

*Saborgan should indeed have heard the widow's protest, but, alas, he was lost in his own world, and he danced with the White-Haired Empress, who'd come from some other world, surely, to his very room and the music filled his head and was so sweet, so magical, and her hands were soft as doves held as gently as he could manage in his own blunted, clumsy fingers. And soft and frail as her hands were, the Empress led, tugging him back and forth so that he never quite regained his balance.*

*The White-Haired Empress was very real. She was in fact a minor demon, conjured and chained into servitude in this ancient tenement on the very edge of the Gadrobi District. Her task, from the very first, had been singular, a geas set upon her by the somewhat neurotic witch dead now these three centuries.*

*The White-Haired Empress was bound to the task of killing cockroaches, in this one room. The manner in which she did so had, over decades and decades, suffered a weakening of strictures, leaving the now entirely loony demon the freedom to improvise.*

*This mortal had huge feet, his most attractive feature, and when they danced he closed his eyes and silently wept, and she could guide those feet on to every damned cockroach skittering across the filthy floor. Step crunch step crunch – there! A big one – get it! Crunch and smear, crunch and smear!*

*In this lone room, barring the insects who lived in terror, there was pure, unmitigated joy, delicious satisfaction, and the sweetest love.*

*It all collapsed at around the same time as the floor. Rotted crossbeams, boards and thick plaster descended on to Widow Lebbil and it was as much the shock as the weight of the wreckage that killed her instantly.*

*Poor Saborgan, losing his grip on the wailing Empress, suffered the stunning implosion of a cane driven up his anus – oh, even to recount is to wince! – which proved a most fatal intrusion indeed. As for the Empress herself, well, after a moment of horrific terror her geas shattered, releasing her at last to return to her home, the realm of the Cockroach Kings (oh, very well, the round man just made up that last bit. Forgive?). Who knows where she went? The only thing for certain is that she danced every step of the way.*

*The vague boom of a collapsing floor in a squalid tenement building somewhere overhead went unnoticed by Seba Krafar, Master of the Assassins' Guild, as he staggered down the subterranean corridor, seeking the refuge of his nest.*

*Would the disasters never end? It had all started with that damned Rallick Nom cult, and then, almost before the dust settled on that, their first big contract ran up against the most belligerent, vicious collection of innkeepers imaginable. And the one that followed?*

*He suspected he was the only survivor. He'd left his crossbowmen to cover his retreat and not one of them had caught up with him; and now, with gas storage caverns igniting one after another, well, he found himself in an abandoned warren of tunnels, rushing through raining dust, coughing, eyes stinging. All ruined. Wrecked. He'd annihilated the entire damned Guild.*

*He would have to start over.*

*All at once, the notion excited him. Yes, he could shape it himself – nothing to inherit. A new structure. A new philosophy, even.*

*Such . . . possibilities.*

*He staggered into his office, right up to the desk, which he leaned on with both hands on its pitted surface. And then frowned at the scattering of scrolls, and saw documents strewn everywhere on the floor – what in Hood's name?*

*'Master Krafar, is it?'*

*The voice spun him round.*

*A woman stood with her back resting against the wall beside the doorway. A cocked crossbow was propped beside her left boot, quarrel head resting on the packed earthen floor. Her arms were crossed.*

*Seba Krafar scowled. 'Who in Hound's name are you?'*

*'You don't know me? Careless. My name is Blend. I'm one of the owners of K'rul's.'*

*'That contract's cancelled – we're done with you. No more—'*

*'I don't care. It's simple – I want the name. The one who brought you the contract. Now, you can give it to me without any fuss, and I will walk out of here and that's the last you'll see of me, and all your worries will be at an end. The Guild removed from the equation. Consider it a gift, but now it's time for you to earn it.'*

*He studied her, gauging his chances. She didn't look like much. There was no way she'd reach that crossbow in time – two quick strides and he'd be right in her face. With two knives in her gut. And then he'd send a note to Humble Measure and claim one more down – leaving what, two or three left? He'd get paid well for that, and Hood knew he needed the coin if he was going to start over.*

*And so he attacked.*

*He wasn't sure what happened next. He had his knives out, she was right there in front of him, and then her elbow smashed into his face, shattering his nose and blinding him with pain. And somehow both thrusts he sent her way, one seeking the soft spot just beneath her sternum, the other striking lower down, failed. One blocked, the other missing entirely, dagger point driving into the wall she'd been leaning against.*

*The blow to his face turned his knees to water, but only for the briefest of moments, for Seba Krafar was a bull of a man, a brawler. Damage was something to shake off and then just get on with it, and so, shoulder hunching, he attempted a slanting slash, trying to gut the bitch right then and there.*

*Something hard hammered his wrist, sending the dagger flying, and bones cracked in his arm. As he stumbled back, tugging the other knife from the wall, he attempted a frantic thrust to keep her off him. She caught his good wrist and her thumb was like an iron nail, impaling the base of his palm. The knife dropped from senseless fingers. She then took that arm and twisted it hard round, pushing his shoulder down and so forcing his head to follow.*

*Where it met a rising knee.*

*An already broken nose struck again, struck even harder, in fact, is not something that can be shaken off. Stunned, not a sliver of will left in his brain, he landed on his back. Some instinct made him roll, up against the legs of his desk, and he heaved himself upright once more.*

*The quarrel took him low on the right side, just above his hip, glancing off the innominate bone and slicing messily through his liver.*

*Seba Krafar sagged back down, into a slump with his back against the desk.*

*With streaming eyes he looked across at the woman.*

*Malazan, right. She'd been a soldier once. No, she'd been a Bridgeburner. He used to roll his eyes at that. A Bridgeburner? So what? Just some puffed up ooh-ah crap. Seba was an assassin. Blood kin to Talo Krafar and now* there *was a monster of a man—*

*Who'd been taken down by a quarrel. Killed like a boar in a thicket.*

*She walked over to stand before him. 'That was silly, Seba. And now here you are, face broken and skewered. That's your liver bleeding out there, I think. Frankly, I'm amazed you're not already dead, but lucky for you that you aren't.' She crouched and held up a small vial. 'If I pour this into that wound – once I pluck out the bolt, that is, and assuming you survive that – well, there's a good chance you'll live. So, should I do that, Seba? Should I save your sorry arse?'*

*He stared at her. Gods, he hurt everywhere.*

*'The name,' she said. 'Give me the name and you've got a chance to survive this. But best hurry up with your decision. You're running out of time.'*

*Was Hood hovering? In that buried place so far beneath the streets? Well, of course he was.*

*Seba gave her the name. He even warned her off – don't mess with that one, he's a damned viper. There's something there, in his eyes, I swear—*

*Blend was true to her word.*

*So Hood went away.*

The cascade of sudden deaths, inexplicable and outrageous accidents, miserable ends and terrible murders filled every abode, every corner and every hovel in a spreading tide, a most fatal flood creeping out through the hapless city on all sides. No age was spared, no weight of injustice tipped these scales. Death took them all: well born and destitute, the ill and the healthy, criminal and victim, the unloved and the cherished.

So many last breaths: coughed out, sighed, whimpered, bellowed in defiance, in disbelief, in numbed wonder. And if such breaths could coalesce, could form a thick, dry, pungent fugue of dismay, in the city on this night not a single globe of blue fire could be seen.

There were survivors. Many, many survivors – indeed, more survived than died – but alas, it was a close run thing, this measure, this fell harvest.

The god walked eastward, out from Gadrobi District and into Lakefront, and, from there, up into the Estates.

This night was not done. My, not done at all.

Unseen in the pitch black of this moonless, smoke-wreathed night, a massive shape sailed low over the Gadrobi Hills, westward and out on to the trader's road. As it drew closer to the murky lights of Worrytown, the silent flier slowly dropped lower until its clawed talons almost brushed the gravel of the road.

Above it, smaller shapes beat heavy wings here and there, wheeling round, plummeting and then thudding themselves back up again. These too uttered no calls in the darkness.

To one side of the track, crouched in high grasses, a coyote that had been about to cross the track suddenly froze.

Heady spices roiled over the animal in a warm, sultry gust, and where a moment earlier there had been black, shapeless clouds sliding through the air, now there was a figure – a man-thing, the kind the coyote warred with in its skull, fear and curiosity, opportunity and deadly betrayal – walking on the road.

But this man-thing, it was . . . different.

As it came opposite the coyote, its head turned and regarded the beast.

The coyote trotted out. Every muscle, every instinct, cried out for a submissive surrender, and yet as if from some vast power outside itself, the coyote held its head high, ears sharp forward as it drew up alongside the figure.

Who reached down to brush gloved fingers back along the dome of its head.

And off the beast bounded, running as fast as its legs could carry it, out into the night, the vast plain to the south.

Freed, blessed, beneficiary of such anguished love that it would live the rest of its years in a grassy sea of joy and delight.

Transformed. No special reason, no grim purpose. No, this was a whimsical touch, a mutual celebration of life. Understand it or stumble through. The coyote's role is done, and off it pelts, heart bright as a blazing star.

Gifts to start the eyes.

Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness, walked between the shanties of Worrytown. The gate was ahead, but no guards were visible. The huge doors were barred.

From beyond, from the city itself, fires roared here and there, thrusting bulging cloaks of spark-lit smoke up into the black night.

Five paces from the gates now, and something snapped and fell away. The doors swung open. And, unaccosted, unnoticed, Anomander Rake walked into Darujhistan.

Howls rose like madness unleashed.

The Son of Darkness reached up and unsheathed Dragnipur.

Steam curled from the black blade, twisting into ephemeral chains that stretched out as he walked up the wide, empty street. Stretched out to drag behind him, and from each length others emerged and from these still more, a forest's worth of iron roots, snaking out, whispering over the cobbles.

He had never invited such a manifestation before. Reining in that bleed of power had been an act of mercy, to all those who might witness it, who might comprehend its significance.

But on this night, Anomander Rake had other things on his mind.

Chains of smoke, chains and chains and chains, so many writhing in his wake that they filled the breadth of the street, that they snaked over and under and spilled out into side streets, alleys, beneath estate gates, beneath doors and through windows. They climbed walls.

Wooden barriers disintegrated – doors and sills and gates and window frames. Stones cracked, bricks spat mortar. Walls bowed. Buildings groaned.

He walked on as those chains grew taut.

No need yet to lean forward with each step. No need yet to reveal a single detail to betray the strength and the will demanded of him.

He walked on.

Throughout the besieged city, mages, witches, wizards and sorcerors clutched the sides of their heads, eyes squeezing shut as unbearable

pressure closed in. Many fell to their knees. Others staggered. Still others curled up into tight foetal balls on the floor, as the world groaned.

Raging fires flinched, collapsed into themselves, died in silent gasps.

The howl of the Hounds thinned as if forced through tight valves.

In a slag-crusted pit twin sisters paused as one in their efforts to scratch each other's eyes out. In the midst of voluminous clouds of noxious vapours, knee deep in magma that swirled like a lake of molten sewage, the sisters halted, and slowly lifted their heads.

As if scenting the air.

Dragnipur.

*Dragnipur.*

Down from the Estates, into that projecting wedge that was Daru, and hence through another gate and on to the main avenue in Lakefront, proceeding parallel to the shoreline. As soon as he reached the straight, level stretch of that avenue, the Son of Darkness paused.

Four streets distant on that same broad track, Hood, Lord of Death, fixed his gaze on the silver-haired figure which seemed to have hesitated, but only for a moment, before resuming its approach.

Hood felt his own unease, yet onward he strode.

The power of that sword was breathtaking, even for a god. *Breathtaking.*

*Terrifying.*

They drew closer, in measured steps, and closer still.

The Hounds had fallen silent. In the wake of crushed fires, smoke billowed low, barely lit by fitful blue gaslight. Piercing in and out of the black clouds, Great Ravens circled, advanced, and retreated; and moments before the two figures reached each other, the huge birds began landing on roof edges facing down into the street, in rows and clusters, scores and then hundreds.

They were here.

To witness.

To know. To believe.

And, perchance, to feed.

Only three strides between them now. Hood slowed his steps. 'Son of Darkness,' he said, 'I have reconsidered—'

And the sword lashed out, a clean arc that took the Lord of Death in the neck, slicing clean through.

As Hood's head pitched round inside its severed cloth sack, the body beneath it staggered back, dislodging what it had lost.

A heavy, solid crunch as the god's head struck the cobbles, rolling on to one cheek, the eyes staring and lifeless.

Black blood welled up from the stump of neck. One more step back, before the legs buckled and the Lord of Death fell to his knees and then sat back.

Opposite the dead god, Anomander Rake, face stretching in agony, fought to remain standing.

Whatever weight descended upon him at this moment was invisible to the mortal eye, unseen even by the thousand Great Ravens perched and leaning far forward on all sides, but its horrendous toll was undeniable.

The Son of Darkness, Dragnipur in one hand, bowed and bent like an old man. The sword's point grated and then caught in the join between four cobbles. And Anomander Rake began to lean on it, every muscle straining as his legs slowly gave way – no, he could not stand beneath this weight.

And so he sank down, the sword before him, both hands on the cross-hilt's wings, head bowed against Dragnipur, and these details alone were all that distinguished him from the god opposite.

They sat, on knees and haunches, as if mirrored images. One leaning on a sword, forehead pressed to the gleaming, smoke-wreathed blade. The other

decapitated, hands resting palm up on the thighs.

One was dead.

The other, at this moment, profoundly . . . vulnerable.

Things noticed.

Things were coming, and coming fast.

And this night, why, it is but half done.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

He slid down the last of the trail and he asked of me,
'Do you see what you expected?'

And this was a question breaking loose, rolling free.
Out from under stones and scattered
Into thoughts of what the cruel fates would now decree.

He settled back in the dust and made his face into pain,
'Did you see only what you believed?'
And I looked down to where blood had left its stain
The charge of what's given, what's received
Announcing the closing dirge on this long campaign.

'No,' I said, 'you are not what I expected to see.'
Young as hope and true as love was my enemy,
'The shields were burnished bright as a sun-splashed sea,
And drowning courage hath brought me to this calamity.
Expectation has so proved the death of me.'

He spoke to say, 'You cannot war against the man
you were,
And I cannot slay the man I shall one day become,
Our enemy is expectation flung backward and fore,
The memories you choose and the tracks I would run.
Slayer of dreams, sower of regrets, all that we are.'

*Soldier at the End of his Days*

(fragment)

Des'Ban of Nemil

They did not stop for the night. With the city's fitful glow to the north, throbbing crimson, Traveller marched as would a man possessed. At times, as she and Karsa rode on ahead to the next rise to fix their gazes upon that distant conflagration, Samar Dev feared that he might, upon reaching them, simply lash out with his sword. Cut them both down. So that he could take Havok for himself, and ride hard for Darujhistan.

Something terrible was happening in that city. Her nerves were on fire. Her skull seemed to creak with some kind of pervasive pressure, building with each onward step. She felt febrile, sick to her stomach, her mouth dry as dust, and she held on to Karsa Orlong's muscled girth as if he was a mast on a storm-wracked ship. He had said nothing for some time now, and she did not have the courage to break that grim silence.

Less than a league away, the city flashed and rumbled.

When Traveller reached them, however, it was as if they did not exist. He was muttering under his breath. Vague arguments, hissed denials, breathless lists of bizarre, disconnected phrases, each one worked out as if it was a justification for something he had done, or something he was about to do. At times those painful phrases sounded like justifications for both. Future blended with the past, a swirling vortex with a tortured soul at its very heart. She could not bear to listen.

Obsession was a madness, a fever. When it clawed its way to the surface, it was terrible to behold. It was impossible not to see the damage it did, the narrowness of the treacherous path one was forced to walk, as if between walls of thorns, jutting knife blades. One misstep and blood was drawn, and before long the poor creature was a mass of wounds, streaked and dripping, blind to everything but what waited somewhere ahead.

And what if he found what he sought? What if he won through in his final battle – whatever that might be? What then for Traveller?

*It will kill him.*

*His reason for living . . . gone.*

*Gods below, I will not bear witness to such a scene. I dare not.*

*For I have my own obsessions . . .*

Traveller marched on in dark argument. She and Karsa rode Havok, but even this frightening beast was starting, shying as if something was bodily pushing against it. Head tossed, hoofs stamped the packed ground.

Finally, after the horse almost reared, Karsa uttered a low snarl and reined in. 'Down, witch,' he said – as Traveller once more stalked past – 'we will walk from here.'

'But Havok—'

'Can fend for himself. When I need him, we shall find each other once more.'

They dismounted. Samar stretched her back. 'I'm exhausted. My head feels like a wet pot in a kiln – about to explode. Karsa—'

'Stay here if you will,' he said, eyes on Traveller's back. 'I will go on.'

'Why? Wherever he's going, it's his battle, not yours. You cannot help him. You must not help him, Karsa – you see that, don't you?'

He grimaced. 'I can guard his back—'

'Why? We have journeyed together out of convenience. And that's done, now. Can't you feel it? It's done. Take one wrong step – cross his path – and he will drag out that sword.' She brought her hands up and pressed hard against her eyelids. Flashes of fire ignited her inner world. No different from what she was seeing in the city before them. She dropped her hands and blinked blearily at the Toblakai. 'Karsa, in the name of mercy, let's turn away. Leave him to . . . whatever's in Darujhistan.'

'Witch, we have been following a trail.'

'Sorry, what?'

'A trail.' He glanced down at her. 'The Hounds.'

She looked again at the city, even as a fireball ripped upward and moments later thunder rolled through the ground at their feet. *The Hounds. They're tearing that city apart.* 'We can't go there! We can't walk into *that*!'

In answer Karsa bared his teeth. 'I do not trust those beasts – are they there to protect Traveller? Or hunt him down in some deadly game in the streets?' He shook his head. 'I'll not clip his heels, witch. We'll keep a respectable distance, but I *will* guard his back.'

She wanted to scream. *You stupid, stubborn, obstinate, thick-skulled bastard!* 'So who guards *our* backs?'

Sudden blackness welled up inside her mind and she must have reeled, for a moment later Karsa was holding her up, genuine concern in his face. 'What ails you, Samar?'

'You idiot, *can't you feel it*?'

'No,' he replied.

She thought he lied then, but had no energy to challenge him. That blackness had seemed vast, depthless, a maw eager to devour her, swallow her down. And, most horrifying of all, something about it was seductive. Slick with sweat, her legs shaky beneath her, she held on to Karsa's arm.

'Stay here,' he said quietly.

'No, it makes no difference.'

He straightened suddenly, and she saw that he was facing the way they had come. 'What – what is it?'

'That damned bear – it's back.'

She twisted round. Yes, there, perhaps a hundred paces away, a huge dark shape. Coming no closer.

'What's it want with me?' she asked in a whisper.

'If you stay, you may find out, witch.'

'No, I said. We'll follow Traveller. It's decided.'

Karsa was silent for a moment, and then he grunted. 'I am thinking . . .'

'What?'

'You wanted to know, earlier, who would be guarding our backs.'

She frowned, and then loosed a small gasp and squinted once more at that monstrous beast. It was just . . . hovering, huge head slowly wagging from side to side, pausing occasionally to lift its snout in their direction. 'I wouldn't trust that, Karsa, I wouldn't trust that at all.'

He shrugged.

But still she resisted, glaring now into the vault of night overhead. 'Where's the damned moon, Karsa? *Where in the Abyss is the damned moon?'*

Kallor was certain now. Forces had converged in Darujhistan. Clashing with deadly consequence, and blood had been spilled.

He lived for such things. Sudden opportunities, unexpected powers stumbling, falling within reach. Anticipation awakened within him.

Life thrust forth choices, and the measure of a man or woman's worth could be found in whether they possessed the courage, the brazen decisiveness, to grasp hold and not let go. Kallor never failed such moments. Let the curse flail him, strike him down; let defeat batter him again and again. He would just get back up, shake the dust off, and begin once more.

He knew the world was damned. He knew that the curse haunting him was no different from history's own progression, the endless succession of failures, the puerile triumphs that had a way of falling over as soon as one stopped looking. Or caring. He knew that life itself corrected gross imbalances by simply folding everything over and starting anew.

Too often scholars and historians saw the principle of convergence with narrow, truncated focus. In terms of ascendants and gods and great powers. But Kallor understood that the events they described and pored over after the fact were but concentrated expressions of something far vaster. Entire ages converged, in chaos and tumult, in the anarchy of Nature itself. And more often than not, very few comprehended the disaster erupting all

around them. No, they simply went on day after day with their pathetic tasks, eyes to the ground, pretending that everything was just fine.

Nature wasn't interested in clutching their collars and giving them a rattling shake, forcing their eyes open. No, Nature just wiped them off the board.

And, truth be told, that was pretty much what they deserved. Not a stitch more. There were those, of course, who would view such an attitude aghast, and then accuse Kallor of being a monster, devoid of compassion, a vision stained indelibly dark and all that rubbish. But they would be wrong. Compassion is not a replacement for stupidity. Tearful concern cannot stand in the stead of cold recognition. Sympathy does not cancel out the hard facts of brutal, unwavering observation. It was too easy, too cheap, to fret and wring one's hands, moaning with heartfelt empathy – it was damned self-indulgent, in fact, providing the perfect excuse for doing precisely nothing while assuming a pious pose.

*Enough of that.*

Kallor had no time for such games. A nose in the air just made it easier to cut the throat beneath it. And when it came to that choice, why, he *never* hesitated. As sure as any force of Nature, was Kallor.

He walked, shins tearing and uprooting tangled grasses. Above him, a strange, moonless night with the western horizon – where the sun had gone down long ago – convulsing with carmine flashes.

Reaching a raised road of packed gravel, he set out, hastening his pace towards the waiting city. The track dipped and then began a long, stretched-out climb. Upon reaching the summit, he paused.

A hundred paces ahead someone had set four torches on high poles where four paths met, creating a square with the flaring firelight centred on the crossroads. There were no buildings in sight, nothing to give reason for such a construction. Frowning, he resumed walking.

As he drew closer, he saw someone sitting on a marker stone, just beneath one of the torches. Hooded, motionless, forearms resting on thighs,

gauntleted hands draped down over the knees.

Kallor felt a moment of unease. He scraped through gravel with one boot and saw the hood slowly lift, the figure straightening and then rising to its feet.

*Shit.*

The stranger reached up and tugged back the hood, then walked to position himself in the centre of the crossroads.

In the wake of recognition, dismay flooded through Kallor. 'No, Spinnock Durav, not this.'

The Tiste Andii unsheathed his sword. 'High King, I cannot let you pass.'

'Let him fight his own battles!'

'This need not be a battle,' Spinnock replied. 'I am camped just off this road. We can go there now, sit at a fire and drink mulled wine. And, come the morning, you can turn round, go back the other way. Darujhistan, High King, is not for you.'

'You damned fool. You know you cannot best me.' He glared at the warrior, struggling. A part of him wanted to . . . *gods* . . . a part of him wanted to weep. 'How many of his loyal, brave followers will he see die? And for what? Listen to me, Spinnock. I have no real enmity against you. Nor Rake.' He waved one chain-clad hand in the air behind him. 'Not even those who pursue me. Heed me, please. I have always respected you, Spinnock – by the Abyss, I railed at how Rake used you—' 'You do not understand,' the Tiste Andii said. 'You never did, Kallor.'

'You're wrong. *I have nothing against any of you!'*

'Korlat—'

'Did you think it was my intention to murder Whiskeyjack? Do you think I just cut down honourable men and loyal soldiers out of spite? You weren't even there! It was Silverfox who needed to die, and that is a failure we shall all one day come to rue. Mark my words. Ah, gods, Spinnock. *They got in my way, damn you! Just as you're doing now!'*

Spinnock sighed. 'It seems there will be no mulled wine this night.'

'Don't.'

'I am here, High King, to stand in your way.'

'You will die. I cannot stay my hand – everything will be beyond control by then. Spinnock Durav, please! This does not need to happen.'

The Tiste Andii's faint smile nearly broke Kallor's heart. *No, he understands. All too well. This will be his last battle, in Rake's name, in anyone's name.*

Kallor drew out his sword. 'Does it occur, to any of you, what these things do to *me*? No, of course not. The High King is cursed to fail, but never to fall. The High King is but . . . what? Oh, the physical manifestation of ambition. Walking proof of its inevitable price. Fine.' He readied his two-handed weapon. 'Fuck you, too.'

With a roar that ripped like fire from his throat, Kallor charged forward, and swung his sword.

Iron rang on iron.

Four torches lit the crossroads. Four torches painted two warriors locked in battle. Would these be the only witnesses? Blind and miserably indifferent with their gift of light?

For now, the answer must be *yes.*

The black water looked cold. Depthless, the blood of darkness. It breathed power in chill mists that clambered ashore to swallow jagged, broken rocks, fallen trees. Night itself seemed to be raining down into this sea.

Glittering rings spun and clicked, and Clip slowly turned to face Nimander and the others. 'I can use this,' he said. 'The power rising from this water, it is filled with currents of pure Kurald Galain. I can use this.'

'A Gate?'

'Well, at least one of you is thinking. A Gate, yes, Nimander.

A Gate. To take us to Black Coral.'

'How close?' Skintick asked.

Clip shrugged. 'Close enough. We will see. At the very least, within sight of the city walls.'

'So get on with it,' said Nenanda, his words very nearly a snarl.

Smiling, Clip faced the Cut once more. 'Do not speak, any of you. I must work hard at this.'

Nimander rubbed at his face. He felt numb, haunted by exhaustion. He moved off to sit on a boulder. Just up from the steep shoreline, thick moss blunted everything, the stumps of rotted trees, the upended roots, the tumbled black stones. The night air clung to him, cold and damp, reaching in to his bones, closing tight about his heart. He listened to the soft lap of the water, the suck and gurgle among the rocks. The smell was rich with decay, the mists sweet with brine.

He could feel the cold of the boulder seeping through, and his hands ached.

Clip spun his chain, whirled the two rings, one gold, one silver, and round and round they went. Apart from that he stood motionless, his back to them all.

Skintick settled down beside Nimander. Their eyes met and Skintick shrugged a silent question, to which Nimander replied with a faint shake of his head.

He'd thought he'd have a few more days. To decide things. The when. The how. The options if they should fail. Tactics. Fall-back plans. So much to think about, but he could speak to no one, could not even hint of what he thought must be done. Clip had stayed too close to them on this descent, as if suspicious, as if deliberately forcing Nimander to say nothing.

There was so much he needed to tell them, and so much that he needed to hear. Discussions, arguments, the weighing of risks and contingencies and coordination. All the things demanded of one who would lead; but his

inability to give voice to his intentions, to deliver orders at the end of a long debate, had made him next to useless.

By his presence alone, Clip had stopped Nimander in his tracks.

In this game of move and counter-move, Clip had outwitted him, and that galled. The moment the charade was shattered, there would be chaos, and in that scene Clip held the advantage. He had only himself to worry about, after all.

No, Nimander had no choice but to act alone, to trust in the others to follow.

He knew they were watching him, his every move, studying his face for any telltale expression, for every silent message, and this meant he had to hold himself in check. He had to guard himself against revealing anything, lest one of them misunderstand and so make a fatal mistake, and all of this was wearing him down.

Something lifted noisily from the black water. A span of darkness, vertical, its upper edges dripping, fast dissolving.

'Follow me,' Clip gasped. 'Quickly!'

Nimander rose and tugged Skintick back – 'Everyone, stay behind me' – and, seeing Clip lunge forward and vanish within the Gate, he hurried forward.

But Nenanda reached the portal before him, rushing in even as he drew his sword.

Cursing under his breath, Nimander darted after him.

The Gate was collapsing. Someone shrieked in his wake.

Nimander staggered on slippery, uneven bedrock, half blinded by streaks of luminescence that scattered like cut webs. He heard a gasping sound, almost at his feet, and a moment later stumbled against something that groaned.

Nimander reached down, felt a body lying prone. Felt something hot and welling under one palm – the slit of a wound, the leaking of blood. 'Nenanda?'

Another gasp, and then, 'I'm sorry, Nimander – I saw – I saw him reaching for his dagger, even as he stepped through – I saw – he knew, he knew you were following, you see – he—'

From somewhere ahead there came a hollow laugh. 'Do you imagine me an idiot, Nimander? Too bad it wasn't you. It should have been you. But then, this way it's just one more death for you to carry along.'

Nimander stared but could see nothing. 'You still need us!'

'Maybe, but it's too risky to have you so close. When I see a viper, I don't invite it into my belt-pouch. So, wander lost in here . . . for ever, Nimander. It won't feel very different from your life before this, I expect.'

'The god within you,' Nimander said, 'is a fool. My Lord will cut it down and you with it, Clip. You don't know him. You don't know a damned thing!'

Another laugh, this one much farther away.

Nimander wiped the tears from his cheeks with his free forearm. Beneath his palm, the pulse of blood from the wound had slowed.

*Too many failures. Too many defeats.*

*A soul carries a vessel of courage. It cannot be refilled. Every thing that takes from it leaves less behind.*

*What do I have left?*

Whatever it was, the time had come to drink deep, to use it all. One last time. Nimander straightened.

'Desra? Skintick? Anyone?'

His words drew echoes, and they were the only replies he received.

Nimander drew his sword, and then set out. In the direction of that mocking laughter.

Ribbons of light swam in the air on all sides.

He encountered no walls, felt no wayward currents of air. The folded bedrock beneath his feet undulated randomly, angling neither upward nor downward for long, uneven enough to make him stumble every now and then, and once to land on his knees with a painful, stinging jolt.

Lost. Not a single sound to betray where Clip might be now.

Yes, this was a clever end for Nimander, one that must have given Clip moments of delicious anticipation. Lost in darkness. Lost to his kin. To his Lord, and to a future that now would never arrive. So perfect, so precise, this punishment—

*'Enough of that, you pathetic creature.'*

*Phaed.*

*'They're here, you fool. As lost as you.'*

*What? Who? Leave me be. I told you, I'm sorry. For what happened to you, for what I tried to do. I'm sorry—*

*'Too late for that. Besides, you don't understand. I lived in fear. I lived in perpetual terror. Of everything. Of all of you. That I'd be found out. Can you imagine, Nimander, what that was like? To live was torture, to dread an end even worse. Oh, I knew it was coming. It had to. People like me win for only so long, before someone notices – and then his face fills with disgust, and he crushes me underfoot.*

*'Or throws me out of a window.'*

*Please, no more—*

*'They're here. Desra, Skintick. Sweet Aranatha. Find them.'*

*How?*

*'I can't do this for you. Shouts will go unheard. There are layers to this place. Layers and layers and layers. You could have walked right through one of them and known nothing. Nimander Golit, the blood of our Lord is within you. The blood of Eleint, too – is that the secret? Is that the one weapon Clip did not know you possess? How could he know? How could anyone? We have suppressed it within ourselves for so long now—'*

*Because Andarist told us to!*

*'Because Andarist told us to. Because he was bitter. And hurting. He thought he could take his brother's children and make them his own, more his own than Rake's.'*

*Nenanda—*

*'Had the thinnest blood of all. We knew that. You knew it, too. It made him too predictable. It's probably killed him. Brother, father, son – these layers are so precious, aren't they? Look on them again, my lover, my killer, but this time . . . with a dragon's eyes.'*

*But, Phaed, I don't know how! How do I do that?*

She had no answer. No, it would never be that simple, would it? Phaed was not an easy memory, not a gentle ghost. Nor his wise conscience. She was none of that.

Just one more kin whose blood stained Nimander's hands.

He had stopped walking. He stood now, surrounded by oblivion.

'My hands,' he whispered. And then slowly lifted them. 'Stained,' he said. 'Yes, stained.'

The blood of kin. The blood of Tiste Andii. *The blood of dragons.*

*That shines like beacons. That call, summon, can cast outward until—*

A woman's hand reached out as if from nowhere, closing round one of his own in a cold grip.

And all at once she was before him, her eyes like twin veils, parting to reveal a depthless, breathtaking love.

He gasped, vertiginous, and almost reeled. 'Aranatha.'

She said, 'There is little time, brother. We must hurry.'

Still holding his hand, she set off, pulling him along as she might a child.

But Nimander was of no mind to complain.

He had looked into her eyes. He had seen it. That love.

He had seen it.

And more, he had understood.

The Dying God, he was coming. Pure as music, bright as truth, solid as certainty. A fist of power, driving onward, smashing everything in its path, until that fist uncurled and the hand opened, to close round the soul of the Redeemer. A weaker god, a god lost in its own confusion.

Salind would be that fist, she would be that hand. Delivering a gift, from which a true and perfect faith would emerge. *This is the blood of redemption. You will understand, Redeemer. Drink deep the blood of redemption, and dance.*

*The song is glory, and glory is a world we need never leave. And so, my beloved Itkovian, dance with me. Here, see me reaching for you—*

Supine on the muddy floor of Gradithan's hut, Salind leaked thick black mucus from her mouth and nose, from the tear ducts of her eyes. Her fingernails were black, and more inky fluid oozed out of them. She was naked, and as he knelt beside her Gradithan had paused, breathing hard, his eyes fixed on the black milk trickling down from the woman's nipples.

Standing wrapped in his raincape close to the doorway, Monkrat looked on with flat eyes, his face devoid of expression. He could see how Gradithan struggled against the sudden thirst, the desire that was half childlike and half sexual, as he stared down at those leaking breasts. The bastard had already raped her, in some twisted consummation, a sacrifice of her virginity, so the only thing that must have been holding the man back was some kind of overriding imperative. Monkrat was not happy thinking about that.

Gradithan lifted Salind's head with one hand and tugged open her mouth with the other. He reached for the jug of saemankelyk. 'Time,' he muttered, 'and time, time, time, the time. Is now.' He tipped the jug and the black juice poured into Salind's gaping, stained mouth.

She swallowed, and swallowed, and it seemed she would never stop, that her body was depthless, a vessel with no bottom. She drank down her need, and that need could never find satiation.

Monkrat grunted. He'd known plenty of people like that. It was a secret poorly kept once you knew what to look for, there in their eyes. Hope and expectation and hunger and the hint of spiteful rage should a single demand be denied. They had a way of appearing, and then never leaving. Yes, he'd known people like that.

And, well, here was their god, shining from Salind's eyes. Everyone needed a god. Slapped together and shaped with frantic hands, a thing of clay and sticks. Built up of wants and all those unanswerable questions that plagued the mortal soul. Neuroses carved in stone. Malign obsessions given a hard, judgemental face – he had seen them, all the variations, in city after city, on the long campaigns of the Malazan Empire. They lined the friezes in temples; they leered down from balustrades. Ten thousand gods, one for every damned mood, it seemed. A pantheon of exaggerated flaws.

Salind was convulsing now, the black poison gushing from her mouth, thick as honey down her chin, and hanging in drop-heavy threads like some ghastly beard.

When she smiled, Monkrat flinched.

The convulsions found a rhythm, and Gradithan was pushed away as she undulated upright, a serpent rising, a thing of sweet venom.

Monkrat edged back, and before Gradithan could turn to him the ex-Bridgeburner slipped outside. Rain slanted down into his face. He paused, ankle-deep in streaming mud, and drew up his hood. That water had felt clean. If only it could wash all of this away. Oh, not the camp – it was already doing that – but everything else. Choices made, bad decisions stumbled into, years of useless living. Would he ever do anything right? His

list of errors had grown so long he felt trapped by some internal pell-mell momentum. Dozens more awaited him—

A bedraggled shape emerged from the rain. Grizzled face, a sopping hairshirt. Like some damned haunt from his past, a ghoul grinning with dread reminders of everything he had thrown away.

Spindle stepped up to Monkrat. 'It's time.'

'For what? Aye, we got drunk, we laughed and cried and all that shit. And maybe I told you too much, but not enough, I'm now thinking, if you believe you can do a damned thing about all this. It's a god we're talking about here, Spin. *A god.'*

'Never mind that. I been walking through this shit-hole.

Monkrat, there's *children* here. Just . . . abandoned.'

'Not for long. They're going to be taken. Used to feed the Dying God.'

'Not if we take 'em first.'

'Take them? Where?'

Spindle bared his teeth, and only now did Monkrat comprehend the barely restrained fury in the man facing him. 'Where? How about *away*? Does that sound too complicated for you? Maybe those hills west of here, in the woods. You said it was all coming down. If we leave 'em they'll all die, and I won't have it.'

Monkrat scratched at his beard. 'Now ain't that admirable of you, but—'

The hard angled point of a shortsword pressed the soft flesh below Monkrat's chin. He scowled. The bastard was fast, all right, and old Monkrat was losing his edge.

'Now,' hissed Spindle, 'you either follow Gredithick around—'

'Gradithan.'

'Whatever. You either follow him like a pup, or you start helping me round up the runts still alive.'

'You're giving me a choice?'

'Kind of. If you say you want to be a pup, then I'll saw off your head, as clumsily as I can.'

Monkrat hesitated.

Spindle's eyes widened. 'You're in a bad way, soldier—' 'I ain't a soldier no more.'

'Maybe that's your problem. You've forgotten things.

Important things.'

'Such as?'

Spindle grimaced, as if searching for the right words, and Monkrat saw in his mind a quick image of a three-legged dog chasing rabbits in a field. 'Fine,' Spindle finally said in a grating tone. 'It had to have happened to you at least once. You and your squad, you come into some rotten foul village or hamlet. You come to buy food or maybe get your tack fixed, clothes mended, whatever. But you ain't there to kill nobody. And so you get into a few conversations. In the tavern. The smithy. With the whores. And they start talking. About injustices. Bastard landholders, local bullies, shit-grinning small-time tyrants. The usual crap. The corruption and all that. You know what I'm talking about, Monkrat?'

'Sure.'

'So what did you do?'

'We hunted the scum down and flayed their arses. Sometimes we even strung 'em up.'

Spindle nodded. 'You did justice, is what you did. It's what a soldier can do, when there's nobody else. We got swords, we got armour, we got all we need to terrorize anybody we damned well please. But Dassem taught us – he taught every soldier in the Malazan armies back then. Sure, we had swords, but who we used 'em on was up to us.' The point of the shortsword fell away. 'We was *soldiers*, Monkrat. We had the chance – the privilege – of doing the right thing.'

'I deserted—'

'And I was forced into retirement. Neither one changes what we were.'

'That's where you're wrong.'

'Then listen to this.' The shortsword pressed against his throat again. 'I can still deliver justice, and if need be I'll do it right now and right here. By cutting a coward's head off.'

'Don't talk to me about cowardice!' Monkrat snapped. 'Soldiers don't talk that ever! You just broke the first rule!' 'Someone turns his back on being a soldier – on what it means in the soul – that's cowardice. You don't like the word, don't live it.'

Monkrat stared into the man's eyes, and hated what he saw there. He sagged. 'Best get on with it then, Spin. I got nothing left. I'm used up. What do you do when the soldier inside you dies before you do? Tell me.'

'You go through the motions, Monkrat. You just follow me. Do as I do. We start there and worry about the rest later.'

Monkrat realized that Spindle was still waiting. *'Do what's right,' Dassem told us.* Gods, even after all this time he still remembered the First Sword's words. *'That's a higher law than the command of any officer. Higher even than the Emperor's own words. You are in a damned uniform but that's not a licence to deliver terror to everyone – just the enemy soldier you happen to be facing. Do what is right, for that armour you wear doesn't just protect your flesh and bone. It defends honour. It defends integrity. It defends justice. Soldiers, heed me well. That armour defends humanity. And when I look upon my soldiers, when I see these uniforms, I see compassion and truth. The moment those virtues fail, then the gods help you, for no armour is strong enough to save you.'*

'All right, Spin. I'll follow you.'

A sharp nod. 'Dassem, he'd be proud. And not surprised, no, not surprised at all.'

'We have to watch out for Gradithan – he wants those virgins. He wants their blood, for when the Dying God arrives.'

'Yeah? Well, Gredishit can chew on Hood's arsehole. He ain't getting 'em.'

'A moment ago I was thinking, Spin . . .'

'Thinking what?'

'That you was a three-legged dog. But I was wrong. You're a damned Hound of Shadow is what you are. Come on. I know where they all huddle to stay outa the rain.'

Seerdomin adjusted the grip on his sword and then glanced back at the Redeemer. The god's position was unchanged. Kneeling, half bent over, face hidden behind his hands. A position of abject submission. Defeat and despair. Hardly an inspiring standard to stand in front of, hardly a thing to fight for, and Seerdomin could feel the will draining from him as he faced once more the woman dancing in the basin.

Convulsing clouds overhead, an endless rain of kelyk that turned everything black. The drops stung and then numbed his eyes. He had ceased to flinch from the crack of lightning, the stuttering crash of thunder.

He had fought for something unworthy once, and had vowed *never again*. Yet here he was, standing between a god of unimaginable power and a god not worth believing in. One wanted to feed and the other looked ready to be devoured – why should he get in the way of the two?

A wretched gasp from the Redeemer snapped him round. The rain painted Itkovian black, ran like dung-stained water down the face he had lifted skyward. 'Dying,' he murmured, so faint that Seerdomin had to step closer to catch the word. 'But no end is desired. Dying, for all eternity. Who seeks this fate? For himself? Who yearns for such a thing? Can I . . . can I help him?'

Seerdomin staggered back, as if struck by a blow to his chest. *That – Beru fend – that is not a proper question! Not against this . . . this thing. Look to yourself, Redeemer! You cannot heal what does not want healing! You cannot mend what delights in being broken!* 'You cannot,' he growled. 'You

cannot help it, Redeemer. You can only fall to it. Fall, vanish, be swallowed up.'

'He wants me. She wants me. She gave him this want, do you see? Now they share.'

Seerdomin turned to gaze upon the High Priestess. She was growing more arms, each bearing a weapon, each weapon whirling and spinning in a clashing web of edged iron. Kelyk sprayed from the blades, a whirling cloud of droplets. Her dance was carrying her closer.

The attack was beginning.

'Who,' Seerdomin whispered, 'will share this with *me*?'

'Find her,' said the Redeemer. 'She remains, deep inside. Drowning, but alive. Find her.'

'Salind? She is nothing to me!'

'She is the fire in Spinnock Durav's heart. She is his life. Fight not for me. Fight not for yourself. Fight, Seerdomin, for your friend.'

A sob was wrenched from the warrior. His soul found a voice, and that voice wailed its anguish. Gasping, he lifted his sword and set his eyes upon the woman cavorting in her dance of carnage. *Can I do this? Spinnock Durav, you fool, how could you have fallen so?*

*Can I find her?*

*I don't know. I don't think so.*

But his friend had found love. Absurd, ridiculous love. His friend, wherever he was, deserved a chance. For the only gift that meant a damned thing. The only one.

Blinking black tears from his eyes, Seerdomin went down to meet her.

Her howl of delight was a thing of horror.

A soldier could discover, in one horrendous, crushing moment, that everything that lay at the heart of duty was a lie, a rotted, fetid mass,

feeding like a cancer on all that the soldier was; and that every virtue was rooted in someone else's poison.

Look to the poor fool at your side. Know well there's another poor fool at your back. This is how far the world shrinks down, when everything else melts in front of your eyes – too compromised to sustain clear vision, the brutal, uncluttered recognition of the lie.

Torn loose from the Malazan Empire, from Onearm's Host, the bedraggled clutch of survivors that was all that remained of the Bridgeburners had dragged their sorry backsides to Darujhistan. They found for themselves a cave where they could hide, surrounded by a handful of familiar faces, to remind them of what had pushed them each step of the way, from the past to the present. And hoping it would be enough to take them into the future, one hesitant, wayward step at a time.

Slash knives into the midst of that meagre, vulnerable clutch, and it just falls apart.

Mallet. Bluepearl.

Like blindfolded goats dragged up to the altar stone.

Not that goats needed blindfolds. It's just no fun looking into a dying animal's eyes.

Picker fell through darkness. Maybe she was flesh and bone. Maybe she was nothing but a soul, torn loose and now plummeting with naught but the weight of its own regrets. But her arms scythed through bitter cold air, her legs kicked out to find purchase where none existed. And each breath was getting harder to snatch from that rushing blast.

In the dream-world every law could be twisted round, bent, folded. And so, as she sensed the unseen ground fast approaching, she spun herself upright and slowed, sudden and yet smooth, and moments later she landed lightly on uneven bedrock. Snail shells crunched underfoot; she heard the faint snap of small rodent bones.

Blinking, gasping one breath after another deep into her lungs, she simply stood for a time, knees slightly flexed, hands out to her sides.

She could smell an animal stench, thick, as if she found herself in a den in some hillside.

The darkness slowly faded. She saw rock walls on which scenes had been pecked, others painted in earthy hues. She saw the half-shells of gourds crowding the rough floor on both sides – she had landed upon a sort of path, reaching ahead and behind, perhaps three paces wide. Before her, six or seven paces away, it ended in a stone wall. Behind her, the trail blended into darkness. She looked once more at the objects cluttering the flanks. In each gourd there was thick, dark liquid. She knew instinctively that it was blood.

The image etched into the wall in front, where the path ended, now snared her attention, and slowly its details began to resolve. A carriage or wagon, a swarm of vague shapes all reaching up for it on both sides, with others hinted at in its wake. A scene of frenzy and panic, the figure sitting on the bench holding reins that seemed to whip about – but no, her mind was playing tricks in this faint light, and that sound, as of wheels slamming and rocking and spinning over broken ground, was only her lunging heart, the rush of blood in her ears.

But Picker stared, transfixed.

A soldier with nothing left to believe in is a terrible thing to behold. When the blood on the hands is unjust blood, the soul withers.

Death becomes a lover, and that love leads to but one place. Every time, but one place.

Friends and family watch on, helpless. And in this tragic scene, the liars, the cynical bearers of poison, they are nowhere to be found.

Endest Silann had once been a priest, a believer in forces beyond the mortal realm; a believer in the benign regard of ancestors, spirits, each one a moral lodestone that cut through the dissembling, the evasions of responsibility, the denials of culpability – a man of faith, yes, in the traditional sense of the word. But these things no longer found harbour in his soul. Ancestors dissolved into the ground, leaving nothing but crumbling flecks of bone in dark earth. Spirits offered no gifts and those still clinging to life were bitter

and savage, too often betrayed, too often spat upon, to hold any love for anyone.

He now believed that mortals were cursed. Some innate proclivity led them again and again on the same path. Mortals betrayed every gift granted them. They betrayed the giver. They betrayed their own promises. Their gods, their ancestors, their children – everywhere, betrayal.

The great forests of Kharkanas had been cut down; the squalid dying islands of growth left behind had each one fallen to fire or blight. The rich soils washed down into the rivers. The flesh of the land was stripped back to reveal bedrock bones. And hunger stalked the children. Mothers wailed, fathers tried on hardened masks of resolve, but before any of this both had looked out upon the ravaged world with affronted disbelief – someone's to blame, someone always is, but by the Abyss, do not look at *me*!

But there was nowhere else to look. Mother Dark had turned away. She had left them to fates of their own devising, and in so doing, she had taken away their privilege of blaming someone else. Such was a godless world.

One might think, then, that a people would rise to fullest height, stand proud, and accept the notion of potential culpability for each decision made or not made. Yes, that would be nice. That would be something to behold, to feed riotous optimism. But such a moment, such stature, never came. Enlightened ages belonged to the past or waited for the future. Such ages acquired the gloss of iconic myth, reduced to abstractions. The present world was real, filled with the grit of reality and compromise. People did not stand tall. They ducked.

There was no one about with whom Endest Silann could discuss all this. No one who might – just might – understand the significance of what he was thinking.

Rush headlong. Things are happening. Standing stones topple one against another and on and on. Tidal surges lift ever higher. Smoke and screams and violence and suffering. Victims piled in heaps like the plunder of cannibals. This is the meat of glee, the present made breathless, impatience burning like acid. Who has time to comprehend?

Endest Silann stood atop the lesser tower of the keep. He held out one hand, knuckles to the earth, as black rain pooled in the cup of his palm.

Was the truth as miserable as it seemed?

Did it all demand that one figure, one solitary figure, rise to stand tall? To face that litany of destruction, the brutality of history, the lie of progress, the desecration of a home once sacred, precious beyond imagining? One figure? Alone?

*Is his own burden not enough? Why must he carry ours? Why have we done this to him? Why, because it's easier that way, and we so cherish the easy paths, do we not? The least of effort defines our virtues. Trouble us not, for we dislike being troubled.*

*The children are hungry. The forests are dead, the rivers poisoned. Calamity descends again and again. Diseases flower like mushrooms on corpses. And soon we will war over what's left. As we did in Kharkanas.*

*He will take this burden, but what does that mean? That we are freed to stay unchanging? Freed to continue doing nothing?*

The black water overflowed the cup, spilled down to become rain once more.

Even the High Priestess did not understand. Not all of it, no. She saw this as a single, desperate gambit, a cast of the knuckles on which rode everything. But if it failed, well, there'd be another game. New players, the same old tired rules. The wealth wagered never lost its value, did it? The heap of golden coins will not crumble. It will only grow bigger yet.

*Then, if the players come and go, while the rules never change, does not that heap in fact command the game? Would you bow to this god of gold? This insensate illusion of value?*

*Bow, then. Press forehead to the hard floor. But when it all goes wrong, show me no affronted disbelief.*

Yes, Anomander Rake would take that burden, and carry it into a new world. But he would offer no absolution. He would deliver but one gift – an

undeserved one – and that was *time.*

The most precious privilege of all. *And what, pray tell, shall we do with it?*

Off to his left, surmounting a much higher tower, a dragon fixed slitted eyes upon a decrepit camp beyond the veil of Night. No rain could blind it, no excuse could brave its unwavering regard. Silanah watched. And waited.

But the waiting was almost over.

Rush then, to this feast. Rush, ye hungry ones, to the meat of glee.

The wall had never been much to begin with. Dismantled in places, unfinished in others. It would never have withstood a siege for any length of time. Despite its execrable condition, the breach made by the Hounds of Shadow was obvious. An entire gate was gone, filled with the flame-licked wreckage of the blockhouses and a dozen nearby structures. Figures now clambered in its midst, hunting survivors, fighting the flames.

Beyond it, vast sections of the city – where heaving clouds of smoke lifted skyward, lit bright by raging gas-fires – suddenly ebbed, as if Darujhistan's very breath had been snatched away. Samar Dev staggered, fell to her knees. The pressure closing about her head felt moments from crushing the plates of her skull. She cried out even as Karsa crouched down beside her.

Ahead, Traveller had swung away from the destroyed gate, seeking instead another portal to the east, through which terrified refugees now spilled out into the ramshackle neighbourhood of shanties, where new fires had erupted from knocked-down shacks and in the wake of fleeing squatters. How Traveller intended to push his way through that mob—

'Witch, you must concentrate.'

'What?'

'In your mind, raise a wall. On all sides. Make it strong, give it the power to withstand the one who has arrived.'

She pulled away from his hand. 'Who? Who has arrived? By the spirits, I can't stand—'

He slapped her, hard enough to knock her down. Stunned, she stared up at him.

'Samar Dev, I do not know who, or what – it is not the Hounds. Not even Shadowthrone. *Someone is there, and that someone blazes. I – I cannot imagine such a being—'*

'A god.'

He shrugged. 'Build your walls.'

The pressure had eased and she wondered at that, and then realized that Karsa had moved round, placing himself between her and the city. She saw sweat running down the Toblakai's face, streaming like rain. She saw the tightness in his eyes. 'Karsa—'

'If we are to follow, you and me both, then you must do this. Build walls, witch, and hurry.'

His gaze lifted to something behind her and all at once she felt a breath of power at her back, gusting against her, sinking past clothes, past skin, through flesh and then deep into her bones. She gasped.

The pressure was pushed back, left to rage against immense barriers now shielding her mind.

She climbed to her feet.

Side by side, they set out after Traveller.

He was cutting across a ragged strip of fallow field, dust rising with each stride, making for the gate at a sharp angle.

The surging mob of people blocking the portal seemed to melt back, and she wondered what those refugees had seen in Traveller's face as he marched straight for them. Whatever it had been, clearly it was not something to be challenged.

A strange, diffuse light now painted the city, the uneven wall, the domes, minarets and spires visible behind it. From a thousand throats erupted a moaning wail. Of shock, of dread. She saw faces lift, one by one. She saw eyes widen.

Grunting, Karsa glanced back, and then halted. 'Gods below!'

She spun. The giant bear loomed twenty or so paces back, its outline limned by a silver light – and that light—

The moon had finally clambered free of the horizon – but it was . . . *Queen of Dreams—*

'Shattered,' Karsa said. 'The moon has shattered. Faces in the Rock, what has happened?'

What rose now into the sky was a mass of fragments, torn apart amidst a cloud of thin rings of dust. It had expanded in its eruption and was now twice its normal size. Huge chunks were visibly spiralling away from the centre. The light it cast was sickly yet astonishingly bright.

The monstrous bear had half turned and was lifting its snout towards that devastated world, as if it was capable of smelling death across the span of countless leagues.

Karsa tugged at Samar Dev. 'He's in the city, witch. We cannot lose him.'

She permitted him to drag her along, her hand enveloped by his.

Perched in a niche close to the gate, Chillbais tracked the one known as Traveller. The demon was shaking uncontrollably. The bellowing of Hounds, the detonations of entire buildings, the arrival of the Son of Darkness and the slaying of a god – oh, any of these could have been sufficient cause for such quivering terror. Even that ruined moon thrusting skyward to the south. Alas, however, it was none of these that had elicited the winged toad's present state of abject extremity.

No, the source was threading through the crowd at the gate, now passing beneath the arch. The one named Traveller. Oh, he held in so much of himself, a will of such breathtaking intensity that Chillbais imagined it

could, if the man so desired, reach into the heavens, close about all those spinning pieces in the sky, and remake the entire moon.

But this was not a healing power. This was not a benign will.

The Hounds howled anew, announcing all that they had sensed, all that they even now reeled away from. Goaded, they lashed out in all directions, killing with mindless frenzy. And once more madness was unleashed upon the hapless people of Darujhistan.

Oh, the master would be furious at this loss of control. Most furious.

Chillbais opened his mouth and managed an impossibly broad grin. A smile to the crazed night sky. The demon worked its way out of the niche and flapped its wings a few times to work out the folds. Then it sprang into the air.

Plunging into the milling crowd was not part of the plan, and the panic that ensued seemed out of all proportion to this modest demon's unexpected arrival. After some hectic moments, Chillbais succeeded in flapping upward once more, bruised and scraped, scratched and scuffed, winging his way to the estate of his master.

Eager to deliver a message.

*He is here! He is here! Dassem Ultor is here!*

*Can I leave now?*

Both Karsa and Samar Dev had witnessed the demon's plight, but neither made comment, even as it winged back up to vanish over the wall. They were rushing, Karsa Orlong imposing enough to clear a path, straight for the gate.

A short time later they stumbled through, out on to a broad avenue into which citizens streamed from every conceivable direction.

They saw Traveller sixty or so paces ahead, reaching an intersection oddly empty of refugees. Those figures nearest it were running in blind panic.

Traveller had halted. A solitary figure, bathed in the light of the shattered moon.

A Hound trotted into view on the warrior's left. A mangled, headless torso hung in its jaws, still draining thick blood. Its lambent eyes were on Traveller, who had not moved, although it was clear that he was tracking the beast with his gaze.

Karsa unsheathed his sword and quickened his pace. Samar Dev, her heart pounding, hurried after him.

She saw the Toblakai slow suddenly, and then stop, still thirty paces from the intersection, and a moment later she saw why.

Cotillion was walking up to Traveller. Another Hound – the black one – had appeared to guard the god's other flank.

Behind them a distant building suddenly crashed down, and in the heart of that thunder there was the sound of two beasts locked in mortal combat, neither yielding. Frail screams echoed in fragile counterpoint.

Traveller waited. Cotillion came to stand directly in front of him, and began to speak.

Samar Dev wanted to rush forward, at least to a spot from where she could overhear the god, catch whatever response Traveller delivered. But Karsa's hand held her back, and he shook his head, saying in a murmur, 'This is not for us, witch.'

Traveller seemed to be refusing something, stepping back, looking away.

Cotillion pressed on.

'He does not want it,' Karsa said. 'Whatever he asks, Traveller does not want it.'

Yes, she could see that. 'Please, I need to—'

'No.'

'Karsa—'

'What drives you is want, not need.'

'Fine, then! I'm a nosy bitch – just leave me to it—'

'No. This is between them, and so it must remain. Samar Dev, answer me this. If you could hear what they say, if you comprehended all that it might mean, would you be able to stay silent?'

She bristled, and then hissed in frustration. 'I'm not very good at doing that, am I? All right, Karsa – but what if I did say something? What harm would that do?'

'Leave him,' said Karsa. 'Leave him free to choose for himself.'

Whatever Cotillion was saying seemed to strike like physical blows, which Traveller absorbed one after another, still looking away – still clearly unable to meet the god's eyes.

The Hound with the chewed-up torso was now eating it with all the mindless intensity common to carnivores filling their stomachs. The other beast had half turned away and seemed to be listening to that distant fight.

Cotillion was unrelenting.

For the god, for Traveller, and for Samar Dev and Karsa Orlong, the world beyond this scene had virtually vanished. A moment was taking portentous shape, hewn one piece at a time, like finding a face in the heart of a block of stone. A moment that spun on some kind of decision, one that Traveller must make, here, now, for it was obvious that Cotillion had placed himself in the warrior's path, and would not step to one side.

'Karsa – if this goes wrong—'

'I have his back,' said the Toblakai in a growl.

'But what if—'

An inhuman cry from Traveller cut through her words, cut through every thought, slashing like a knife. Such a forlorn, desperate sound – it did not belong to him, could not, but he had thrust out one arm, as if to shove Cotillion aside.

They stood too far apart for that. Yet Cotillion, now silent, simply stepped away from Traveller's path.

And the warrior walked past, but now it was as if each boot needed to be dragged forward, as if Traveller now struggled against some terrible, invisible tide. That ferocious obsession seemed to have come untethered – he walked as would a man lost.

Cotillion watched him go, and she saw him lift a forearm to his eyes, as if he did not want the memory of this, as if he could wipe it away with a single, private gesture.

Although she did not understand, sorrow flooded through Samar Dev. Sorrow for whom? She had no answer that made sense. She wanted to weep. For Traveller. For Cotillion. For Karsa. *For this damned city and this damned night.*

The Hounds had trotted off.

She blinked. Cotillion too had disappeared.

Karsa shook himself, and then led her onward once more.

The pressure was building, leaning in on her defences. She sensed cracks, the sifting of dust. And as they stumbled along in Traveller's wake, Samar Dev realized that the warrior was marching straight for the nexus of that power.

The taste of fear was bitter on her tongue.

*No, Traveller, no. Change your mind. Change it, please.*

But he would not do that, would he? Would not. Could not. *The fate of the fated, oh, that sounds clumsy, and yet . . . what else can it be called? This force of inevitability, both willed and unwilling, both unnecessary and inexorable. The fate of the fated.*

Walking, through a city trapped in a nightmare, beneath the ghoulish light of a moon in its death-throes. Traveller might as well be dragging chains, and at the ends of those chains, none other than Karsa Orlong and Samar

Dev. And Traveller might as well be wearing his own collar of iron, something invisible but undeniable heaving him forward.

She had never felt so helpless.

In the eternity leading up to the moment of the Lord of Death's arrival, the world of Dragnipur had begun a slow, deadly and seemingly unstoppable convulsion. Everywhere, the looming promise of annihilation. Everywhere, a chorus of desperate cries, bellowing rage and hopeless defiance. The raw nature of each chained thing was awakened, and each gave that nature voice, and each voice held the flavour of sharp truth. Dragons shrilled, demons roared, fools shrieked in hysteria. Bold heroes and murderous thugs snatched deep breaths that made ribs creak, and then loosed battle cries.

Argent fires were tumbling down from the sky, tearing down through clouds of ash. An army of unimaginable size, from which no quarter was possible, had begun a lumbering charge, and weapons clashed the rims of shields and this white, rolling wave of destruction seemed to surge higher as if seeking to merge with the storm clouds.

Feeble, eroded shapes dragged along at the ends of chains now flopped blunted limbs as if to fend off the fast closing oblivion. Eyes rolled in battered skulls, remnants of life and of knowledge flickering one last time.

No, nothing wanted to die. When death is oblivion, life will spit in its face. If it can.

The sentient and the mindless were now, finally, all of one mind.

*Shake awake all reason. These gathered instincts are not the end but the means. Rattle the chains if you must, but know that that which binds does not break, and the path is never as wayward as one might believe.*

Ditch stared with one eye into the descending heavens, and knew terror, but that terror was not his. The god that saw with the same eye filled Ditch's skull with its shrieks. *Born to die! I am born to die! I am born to die! Not fair not fair not fair!* And Ditch just rattled a laugh – or at least imagined that he did so – and replied, *We're all born to die, you idiot. Let the span last a single heartbeat, let it last a thousand years. Stretch the heartbeat*

*out, crush down the centuries, it's no different. They feel the same, when the end arrives.*

*Gods, they feel the same!*

No, he was not much impressed by this godling cowering in his soul. Kadaspala was mad, mad to think such a creation could achieve anything. Etch deep into its heart this ferocious hunger to *kill*, and then reveal the horror of its helplessness – oh, was that not cruel beyond all reason? Was that not its own invitation into insanity?

*Kadaspala, you have but made versions of yourself. You couldn't help it – yes, I see that.*

*But, damn you, my flesh belonged to me. Not you.*

*Damn you—*

But curses meant nothing now. Every fate was now converging. *Hah hah, take that, you pious posers, and you arrogant shits, and all you whining victims – see what comes! It's all the same, this end, all the same!*

And here he was, trapped in the greater scheme. His skin a piece of a tapestry. And its grand scene? A pattern he could never read.

The demon Pearl stood wearing bodies from which a forest of iron roots swept down in loops and coils. It could carry no more, and so it stood, softly weeping, its legs like two failing trunks that shook and trembled. It had long since weighed the value of hatred. For the High Mage Tayschrenn, who first summoned it and bound it to his will. For Ben Adaephon Delat, who unleashed it against the Son of Darkness; and for Anomander Rake himself, whose sword bit deep. But the value was an illusion. Hate was a lie that in feeding fills the hater with the bliss of satiation, even as his spirit starves. No, Pearl did not hate. Life was a negotiation between the expected and the unexpected. One made do.

Draconus staggered up. 'Pearl, my friend, I have come to say goodbye. And to tell you I am sorry.'

'What saddens you?' the demon asked.

'I am sorry, Pearl, for all of this. For Dragnipur. For the horror forged by my own hands. It was fitting, was it not, that the weapon claimed its maker? I think, yes, it was. It was.' He paused, and then brought both hands up to his face. For a moment it seemed he would begin clawing his beard from the skin beneath it. Instead, the shackled hands fell away, down, dragged by the weight of the chains.

'I too am sorry,' said Pearl. 'To see the end of this.'

*'What?'*

'So many enemies, all here and not one by choice. Enemies, and yet working together for so long. It was a wondrous thing, was it not, Draconus? When necessity forced each hand to clasp, to work as one. A wondrous thing.'

The warrior stared at the demon. He seemed unable to speak.

Apsal'ara worked her way along the top of the beam. It was hard to hold on, the wagon pitching and rocking so with one last, useless surge forward, and the beam itself thick with the slime of sweat, blood and runny mucus. But something was happening at the portal, that black, icy stain beneath the very centre of the wagon.

A strange stream was flowing into the Gate, an intricate pattern ebbing down through the fetid air from the underside of the wagon's bed. Each tendril was inky black, the space around it ignited by a sickly glow that pulsed slower than any mortal heart.

Was it Kadaspala's pathetic god? Seeking to use the tattooist's insane masterpiece as if it was a latticework, a mass of rungs, down which it could clamber and so plunge through the Gate? Seeking to *escape*?

If so, then she intended to make use of it first.

Let the cold burn her flesh. Let pieces of her simply fall away. It was a better end than some snarling manifestation of chaos ripping out her throat.

She struggled ever closer, her breath sleeting out in crackling plumes that sank down in sparkling ice crystals. It reminded her of her youth, the nights

out on the tundra, when the first snows came, when clouds shivered and shed their diamond skins and the world grew so still, so breathless and perfect, that she felt that time itself was but moments from freezing solid – to hold her for ever in that place, hold her youth, hold tight her dreams and ambitions, her memories of the faces she loved – her mother, her father, her kin, her lovers. No one would grow old, no one would die and fall away from the path, and the path itself, why, it would never end.

*Leave me in mid-step. My foot never to settle, never to edge me forward that much closer to the end of things. Yes, leave me here. At the very heart of possibilities, not one of which will crash down. No failures to come, no losses, no regrets to kiss upon the lips – I will not feel the cold.*

*I will not feel the cold—*

She cried out in the frigid, deathly air. Such pain – how could she ever get close enough?

Apsal'ara drew herself up, knees beneath her. And eyed that pattern, just there, a body's length away and still streaming down. If she launched herself from this place, simply threw herself forward, would that flowing net catch her?

Would it simply shatter? Or flow aside, opening up to permit the downward plunge of a body frozen solid, lifeless, eyes open but seeing nothing?

She had a sudden thought, shivering up through her doubts, her fears. And, with aching limbs, she began dragging up the length of her chains, piling the links on the beam in front of her.

Was the Gate's cold of such power that it could snap these links? If she heaved the heap into that Gate, as much as she could, *would the chains break*?

And then?

She snarled. *Yes, and then what? Run like a hare, leave the wagon far behind, flee the legions of chaos?*

*And when the Gate itself is destroyed, where will I run then? Will this world even exist?*

She realized then that such questions did not matter. To be free, even if only for a moment, would be enough.

*Apsal'ara, the Mistress of Thieves. How good was she? Why, she slipped the chains of Dragnipur!*

She continued piling up links of the chains, her breaths coming in agonized, lung-numbing gasps.

Draconus stumbled away from Pearl's side. He could not bear the emotions the demon stirred to life within him. He could not understand such a power to forgive, never mind the sheer madness of finding something worthwhile in this cursed realm. And to see Pearl standing there, almost crushed beneath the twitching, dripping bodies of fallen comrades, no, that too was too much.

Kadaspala had failed. The pattern was flawed; it had no power to resist what was about to assail them. It had been a desperate gambit, the only kind Draconus had left, and he could not even rail at the blind, legless Tiste Andii. *None of us were up to this.*

*The moment Rake ceased killing things, we were doomed.*

And yet, he found he had no rage left in him when he thought of Anomander Rake. In fact, he had begun to understand, even sympathize with that exhausted desire to end things. To end *everything.* The delusion was calling it a game in the first place. That very founding principle had assured ultimate failure. Bored gods and children with appalling power, these were the worst sorts of arbiters in this scheme of existence. They fought change even as they forced it upon others; they sought to hold all they claimed even as they struggled to steal all they could from rivals. They proclaimed love only to kill it in betrayal and spite.

Yes, Draconus understood Rake. Any game that played with grief was a foul thing, an abomination. *Destroy it. Bring it all down, Rake. Rake, my*

*heir, my son in spirit, my unknown and unknowable inheritor. Do as you must.*

*I stand aside.*

*Oh, bold words.*

*When the truth is, I have no choice.*

The force that suddenly descended upon the realm of Dragnipur was of such magnitude that, for an instant, Draconus believed the chaos had finally reached them, and he was driven to his knees, stunned, half blinded. The immense pressure bore down, excruciating, and Draconus ducked his head, covered it with his arms, and felt his spine bowing beneath a crushing presence.

If there was sound, he heard nothing. If there was light, he saw only darkness. If there was air, he could not draw it into his lungs. He felt his bones groaning—

The torture eased with the settling of a skeletal, long-fingered hand on his right shoulder.

Sounds rose once more, strangely muted. A renewed storm of wailing terror and dismay. In front of Draconus the world found its familiar details, although they seemed ghostly, ephemeral. He was able, at last, to breathe deep – and he tasted death.

Someone spoke above him. 'He is indeed a man of his word.'

And Draconus twisted round, lifted his gaze – the hand on his shoulder rasping away with a rustle of links – and stared up at the one who had spoken. At Hood, the Lord and High King of the Dead.

*'No!'* Draconus bellowed, rising only to stagger back, almost tripping on his chains. *'No! What has he done? By the Abyss, what has Rake done?'*

Hood half raised his arms and seemed to be staring down at the manacles enclosing his gaunt wrists.

Disbelief collapsed into shock, and then raw horror. This made no sense. Draconus did not understand. He could not – gods – he could not believe—

He spun round, then, and stared at the legions of chaos – oh, they had been pushed back, a league or more, by the arrival of this singular creature, by the power of Hood. The actinic storm clouds had tumbled in retreat, building anew and seeming to thrash in frustration – yes, an interlude had been purchased. But – 'Wasted. All wasted! Why? This has achieved *nothing*! Hood – you were betrayed. Can you not see that? No—' Draconus clutched at his head. 'Rake, oh Rake, what did you want of this? How could you think it would achieve anything?'

'I have missed you, Draconus,' Hood said.

And he twisted round once more, glaring at the god. Jaghut. Yes, the mad, unknowable Jaghut. 'You damned fool! You *asked* for this, didn't you? Have you lost your mind?'

'A bargain, old friend,' Hood replied, still studying the chains on his wrists. 'A . . . gamble.'

'What will happen? When chaos claims you? When chaos devours the realm of death itself? You have betrayed the gods, all of them. You have betrayed all life. When you fall—'

'Draconus,' Hood cut in with a sigh, reaching up now to pull back the hood, revealing that withered Jaghut face, the clawed lines of eternal sorrow. 'Draconus, my friend,' he said softly, 'surely you do not think I have come here alone?'

He stared at the god, for a moment uncomprehending. And then – he caught a distant roar of sound, edging in from three of the four horizons, and those indistinct skylines were now . . . *seething*.

As the armies of the dead marched at the behest of their Lord.

From one side, a score of riders was fast approaching.

'Hood,' Draconus said, numbed, baffled, 'they are unchained.'

'So they are.'

'This is not their fight.'

'Perhaps. That is, as yet, undecided.'

Draconus shook his head. 'They cannot be here. They cannot fight the enemy – those dead, Hood, all they have left is their identities, each soul, barely holding on. *You cannot do this to them! You cannot ask this of them!'*

The god was now eyeing the wagon. 'All I shall ask,' he said, 'of the fallen, Draconus, is that they choose. Of their own will. After this, I shall ask nothing of them. Ever again.'

'So who will claim the dead?'

'Let the gods see to their own.'

The coldness of that response staggered Draconus. 'And what of those who worship no gods?'

'Yes, what of them?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'After this,' Hood said, still studying the wagon, 'the dead will not be my concern. Ever again.'

The approaching riders rode rotted, skeletal mounts. Ragged capes flailed out behind the warriors. From the advancing armies, countless standards wavered and pitched about amidst up-thrust spearheads. The numbers were indeed unimaginable. Broken fragments of war songs arrived like tatters of wind. The realm groaned – Draconus could not comprehend the weight that must now be crushing down the weapon's wielder. Could Draconus have withstood it? He did not know. But then, perhaps even at this moment Anomander Rake himself was dying, bones snapping, blood spurting . . .

But there was more. Here, before his eyes.

All the creatures chained to the wagon had ceased pulling the enormous edifice – for the first time in millennia, the wagon had *stopped rolling*. And those creatures stood or knelt, staring outward, silent, perhaps disbelieving, as legions of the dead closed in. A flood, an ocean of iron and bone—

The riders arrived. Strangers all to Draconus. Six trotted their withered mounts closer. One of them was masked, and he had seen those masks before – a host slain in succession by Anomander Rake. *Seguleh.* The marks upon this one told Draconus that he was looking upon the Second. Had he challenged the First? Or had someone challenged him?

The Second was the first to speak. 'This is the sorry shithole you want us to fight for, Hood? Flinging ourselves into the maw of chaos.' The masked face seemed to scan the huddled, bedraggled creatures in their chains. 'What are these, that we must now die again for? That we must cease for? Miserable wretches, one and all! Useless fools, bah! Hood, you ask too much.'

The Lord of Death did not even face the Seguleh as he replied, 'Do you now change your mind, Knight?'

'No,' he said. 'I was just complaining.' He drew out a pair of notched, rust-stained swords. 'You know me better than that. Still, oh, how I wanted Skinner. To lose him this way – by the Tyrant, it *galls.'*

'That is why,' said Hood, 'you will not lead the Dead into this war.'

'What? I am the Knight of Death! The damned bony fist himself! I demand—'

'Oh, do be quiet, Second,' sighed the Lord of Death. 'Other tasks await you – and you will not rue them, I am sure. Iskar Jarak, will you command in the Knight's stead? At the head of the spear, driving into the very heart of the enemy?'

The one so addressed had the look of a veteran among veterans. Grey-bearded, scarred, wearing threadbare, faded colours over his plain chain hauberk. Grey and magenta, bordered in black. At Hood's request he faced the Jaghut. 'We will harden the point,' he said. 'With Malazans. At the very tip, my Bridgeburners. Dujek on my left flank, Bult on the right with the Seventh and his Wickans.' He then twisted in the saddle to regard another soldier. 'Brukhalian and his Grey Swords to the right of Bult.'

Brukhalian nodded. 'I find honour in that, Iskar Jarak.'

'Skamar Ara, your Jacuruku legions to the left of Dujek. Hood, listen well. Beyond the spear, so many of the rest are so much dross. Their will is weakened by countless millennia – they will march into the face of the enemy, but they will not last.'

'Yes,' said Hood.

'Just so you know,' said Iskar Jarak. 'Just so you know.'

'Return now to your forces,' Hood commanded. 'Iskar Jarak, send to me the one-eyed outrider. And Bult, find my Soldier, the one once named Baudin. There are things still to do.'

Draconus watched as the commanders rode off, with only the Seguleh remaining, swords sheathed once more.

'Hood,' he said, 'what is happening here? You will ask the dead to fight for us? They will fail. They will earn oblivion and naught else. They cannot succeed, Hood. The chaos pursuing Dragnipur will not be denied – do you understand what I'm telling you?'

The Knight snorted. 'It is you who does not understand, Elder. Long before he was Lord of the Fallen, he was *Jaghut*.

Lords of the Last Stands, hah! Sentinels of the Sundered Keeps. Devourers of the Forlorn Hope. You, Elder, who stood time and again against the Tiste Andii, the Tiste Edur – you, who walked the ashes of Kharkanas itself – understand me. The dour Tiste Andii and the suicidal Edur, they are as *nothing* to the miserable madness of the Jaghut!'

During this tirade, Hood continued to stare at the wagon, at its towering, tottering heap of bodies. And then the Lord of the Dead spoke. 'I often wondered what it looked like, this Hold creaking on its wooden wheels . . . a pathetic thing, really. Crude, clumsy.' He faced Draconus, rotted skin curling back from the tusks. 'Now, *turn it around.'*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ask what the dead face
Snatching the curtain aside These stony tracks into blind worlds
Where to grope is to recall
All the precious jewels of life

Ask what the dead see
In that last backward glance
These fetish strings knots left untied
Where every sinew strains
To reach and touch once more

Ask what the dead know
When knowing means nothing
Arms full and heaped with baubles
As if to build a home anew
In places we've never been

Ask but the dead do not answer
Behind the veil of salty rain
Skirl now amid the rotted leavings
When the worms fall away
To that wealth of silence

*The Lost Treasures of Indaros*
Fisher kel Tath

Eyes rolling white, the ox ran for its life. Cart skidding and bouncing, tilting on one wild wheel as the moaning beast hurtled round a corner and raced down a cobbled street.

Even the gods could not reach through that thick-boned pate of skull, down into the tender knot of terror in its murky brain. Once prodded awake, incessant need blurred the world beyond, reducing all to a narrow tunnel with salvation at the far, far end. Why, who could comprehend such extremity? Not mortal kin, much less a god with its eternally bemused brow – to regard such fitful interludes, blank-eyed and mind rushing past like a flash flood, what would be the value of that, after all?

The beast is what it is. Four-legged, two-legged. Panic will use as many limbs as are available to it, and a few more besides. Panic will ride a wheeled cart, and thunder on dung-smeared hoofs. Panic will scrabble up the very walls as one horrendous Hound after another slinks past.

The night air stinks and that stink fills the nostrils with all the frenzied flags of a ship floundering on shoals. Smoke and blood, bile and piss. But, mostly, blood.

And then there were the screams. Ringing out everywhere, so many of them cutting off in mid-shriek, or, even more chilling, in strangled gurgle. Mothers never before heard such a multitude of beseeching calls! And who could say if the ox was not bellowing for its own, for that sweet teat, the massive hulk looming overhead, with all its sure scents and briny warmth? Alas, the beast's mam was long since sent off to pull the great cart beyond the veil, and even could she come lumbering back at the desperate call of her get, what might she achieve in the face of a Hound?

No, solitary flight this must remain. For each and all. Ox, horse, dog, cat, mouse and rat, lizard and gnat. And people of all sorts. Old men with limps, old men who never limped in their lives but did so now. Women of all ages, sizes and dispositions, who would have limped could it have earned the necessary sympathy. Yet when even the rooftops hold no succour, why bother riding this bouncing cart of headlong panic? Best to simply flop down in abject surrender, with but a few tugs to rearrange the lie of one's

dress or whatnot. Let the men soil themselves in their terror – they never washed enough as it was.

Nobles fled ignobly, the fallen fairly flew as if on winged feet, thieves blustered and bullies whined and wheedled, guards in their blind fear observed nothing and soldiers fled every clash of iron, tooth and claw. Fools with nothing stood their ground. Gamblers danced and whores bluffed – and inside a Temple of Shadow deliciously feminine acolytes squealed and darted from the path of a screaming Magus atop his charging mule, straight through the grand altar room, censers flying with tails of uncoiling serpentine smoke and heads with glowing coal eyes in myriad profusion. In the mule's careering wake, winged bhokarala shrieked and flitted about flinging gobs of snot and segmented cones of hairy dung at every fleeing female, while spiders swarmed up from the old long-forgotten blood drain at the base of the altar stone, a veritable carpet of seething jerky stick-legs, glistening abdomens, patterned thoraxes and beady Dal Honese eyes by the thousands, nay tens of thousands! And was it any wonder the Magus and the mule pelted right across the chamber, the doors at the far end exploding open as if of their own accord?

Even as the High Priestess – stumbling out from behind a curtain like a woman tossed from the throes of manic lovemaking, with stubble-rubbed chin and puffy lips high and low and breasts all awry and great molten swells of pale flesh swaying to and fro – plunging, yes, into the midst of that crawling black carpet of spite and venom, and so no wonder she began a dance riotous in its frenzy but let's face it, even Mogora was too shocked, too disbelieving, to sink a forest of fangs into such sweet meat – and the bhokarala swooped down to scoop up handfuls of yummy spiders and *crunch crunch* into their maws and if spiders could scream, why, they did so then, even as they foamed in swirling retreat back down the drain.

Mule and Magus drum-rolled down the colonnade and out through another shattered set of doors, out into the moody alleyway with its huddled mass of hiding refugees, who now scattered at the arrival of this dread apparition, and the squall of bhokarala swirling out behind it.

Now, wing swift as a burning moth across the city, back to the ox as it lumbered along in heart-pounding, chest-heaving exhaustion – pursued by an angry cart and who knew what else – and found itself fast approaching the collapsed ruin of an enormous building of some sort . . .

Serendipity serves as the quaintest description of the fickle mayhem delivered by the Hounds of Shadow. Shortly following the breach of the gate, Baran pelted westward in pursuit of Pallid, as that bone-white beast broke from the pack with untoward designs in another part of the stricken city.

Pallid was unaware that it was being hunted as it discovered a dozen city guards rushing down the centre of the street, heading for the destroyed gate. The monstrous beast lunged into their midst, lashing out with slavering jaws. Armour collapsed, limbs were torn away, weapons spun through the air. Screams erupted in a welter of slaughter.

Even as Pallid crushed in its jaws the head of the last guard, Baran arrived in an avalanche. The impact boomed like thunder as Pallid was struck in the side, the caged bell of its chest reverberating as both beasts skidded and then struck the wall of a large building.

The solid, fortified entranceway was punched inward. Stone shards tore through the three people unlucky enough to be stationed in the front room. The huge blocks framing the doors tumbled down, bouncing like knuckle bones, crushing one of the wounded men before he could even scream. The remaining two, lacerated and spilling blood, were pushed back by the broad front desk, and pinned against the far wall. Both died within moments, bones and organs macerated.

Rolling, snapping and growling, the two Hounds shattered that desk, and the grillework attached to it sailed upward to crack on the ceiling, which had already begun sagging as its supports and braces gave way. With terrible groans, the entire front of the structure dragged itself down, and now screams rose through the dust, muted and pitiful.

Another wall collapsed under the impact of the beasts, and beyond it was a corridor and bars lining cells, and two more guards who sought to flee

down the aisle's length – but this entire room was coming down, the iron bars snapping out from their frames, locks shattering. Prisoners vanished beneath splintered wooden beams, plaster and bricks.

Rearing back on to its hind legs, knocked over by another charge from Baran, Pallid smashed into one cell. The prisoner within it pitched down and rolled up against one side as the Hounds, locked once more, knocked down the back wall and, kicking and snarling, rolled into the space beyond – an alleyway already half filled with falling masonry as the entire gaol broke apart.

The lone prisoner scrambled back to his feet and rushed into the Hounds' wake—

But not in time, as the floor above dropped down to fill the cell.

In the alley Pallid had managed to close its jaws about Baran's shoulder, and with a savage surge sent the beast wheeling through the air to crunch into what remained of the wall on that side – and this too folded inward beneath the impact of Baran's thrashing weight.

From the wreckage of the first cell, a section of plaster and mortared brick lifted up, and as it tumbled back the prisoner – covered in dust, bruised and bleeding – began to climb free.

Pallid, hearing these sounds – the gasps and coughs, the scrambling – wheeled round, eyes blazing.

And Barathol paused, legs still pinned, and stared into those infernal orbs, and knew that they were the last things he would ever see.

Pallid gathered its legs for its charge. Its smeared, torn lips stretched back to reveal its massive fangs, and then it sprang forward—

Even as a figure hurtled bodily into its side, striking it low, beneath its right shoulder, hard enough to twist the animal round as it flew in mid-air.

Barathol flung himself back and as much to one side as he could manage, as the Hound's crimson-splashed head pounded side-on into the rubble, its flailing body following.

Picking himself up from the ground, Chaur looked over at Barathol, and then showed him a bright red smile, even as he dragged free the huge war-axe he had collected from the smithy – Barathol's very own weapon. As Pallid clambered back upright, Chaur threw the axe in Barathol's direction, and then picked up a chunk of stone.

Barathol shrieked, desperate to tear himself free, as the white Hound, snarling, spun to face Chaur with fury incandescent in its eyes.

From the rubble farther down the alley, Baran was working free, but it would not arrive in time. Not for Chaur.

Kicking, heedless of tearing flesh, Barathol fought on.

Chaur threw his stone the instant the white Hound charged.

It struck the beast's snout dead-on.

A yelp of agony, and then the beast's momentum slammed it into Chaur, sent him flying across the alley to crunch sickeningly against the opposite wall. When he fell to the grimy cobbles, he did not move.

Barathol dragged his legs loose, leaving trails of blood and pieces of meat. He rolled, grasping hold of the axe handle, and then heaved himself to his feet.

Pallid's huge head turned.

Baran broke clear into the alley.

The white Hound looked over, and, with another snarl, the beast pivoted round and fled.

A moment later Baran flashed past.

Barathol sagged back on wobbly legs. Drawing in one cold breath after another, he turned his gaze once more upon the motionless body opposite. With a sob, he dragged himself to his feet and stumbled over.

In the strange, mysterious places within the brain, places that knew of themselves as Chaur, a black flood was seeping in, and one by one those places began to drown. Fitful sparks ebbed, and once gone did not light

again. His state of unconsciousness slipped into something deeper, a kind of protective oblivion that mercifully hid from Chaur the fact that he was dying.

His expression was serene, save for the slow sag along one side of his face, and when Barathol rolled back his eyelids, the pupil of one eye was vastly dilated.

Weeping, the blacksmith pulled Chaur's head and upper body on to his thighs. The rest of the world, the explosions, the screams, the thunder of battle, all fell away, and it was some time before Barathol realized that someone was clambering out of the rubble that was the gaol. A staccato cascade of curses in Falari, Malazan, Dobri and Daru. Blinking, the blacksmith lifted his gaze.

'Antsy – here, please, I need your help! Please. He's hurt.'

The ex-Bridgeburner was covered in dust but otherwise unscathed. 'I lost my damned sword. I lost my damned crossbow. I lost my damned sharpers. I lost my—' 'Antsy! Hood's breath, please help me – we need to find a healer. High Denul – there must be one in the city. *There must be!'*

'Well, there's Mallet, but he's – shit, he's dead. I forgot. Can't believe I forgot.' Antsy crouched down and studied Chaur for a moment, and then he shook his head. 'He's done for, Barathol. Cracked skull, bleeding into his brain – you can always tell, when one side of the face goes—'

'I know all that, damn you. We need a healer! Think, Antsy – there must be *someone.'*

'Maybe, but not close – we got to cross half the city, Barathol, and with them Hounds—'

'Never mind the Hounds.' The blacksmith gathered Chaur up into his arms and straightened.

Antsy stared. 'You can't carry him—'

'Then help me!'

'I'm trying! Let me think.'

At that moment they both heard the clumping of hoofs, the clack of wooden wheels on cobbles. And they turned to the alley mouth.

Behold, the ox. Too weary to run. Even the cart in its wake clumped in exhaustion. Stolid legs trembled. Mucus slathered down in a gleaming sheet that dragged dusty tendrils between the beast's front hoofs. The painful clarity of panic was fading, dulling its eyes once more, and when the two man-things arrived and set down a third body on the bed of the cart, why, this was old business as far as the ox was concerned. At last, the world had recovered its sanity. There were tasks to be done, journeys to complete. Salvation sweeter than mam's milk.

Tired but content, the beast fell in step beside the manthings.

The two cousins stood on the rooftop, looking out over the city. Conflagrations lit the night sky. A section of the Gadrobi District was aflame, with geysers of burning gas spouting high into the air. A short time earlier a strange atmospheric pressure had descended, driving down the fires – nothing was actually spreading, as far as could be determined, and the detonations had grown more infrequent. Even so, there was no one fighting the flames, which was, all things considered, hardly surprising.

In the courtyard below, Studious Lock was fussing about over the fallen compound guards, both of whom had been dragged out on to pallets. Miraculously, both still lived, although, having survived the assassins, there remained the grave chance that they would not survive Studlock's ministrations. Scorch and Leff had set themselves the task of patrolling outside the estate, street by alley by street by alley, round and round, crossbows at the ready and in states of high excitement.

'These Hounds,' said Rallick, 'are most unwelcome.'

'It seems walls don't stop them either. Any idea why they're here?'

When Rallick did not reply, Torvald glanced over and saw that his cousin was staring up at the shattered moon.

Torvald did not follow his gaze. That mess unnerved him. Would those spinning chunks now begin raining down? Rallick had noted earlier that

most of the fragments seemed to be heading the other way, growing ever smaller. There was another moon that arced a slower path that seemed to suggest it was farther away, and while it appeared tiny its size was in fact unknown. For all anyone knew, it might be another world as big as this one, and maybe now it was doomed to a rain of death. Anyway, Torvald didn't much like thinking about it.

'Rallick—'

'Never mind, Tor. I want you to stay here, within the walls. I doubt there will be any trouble – the Mistress has reawakened her wards.'

'Tiserra—'

'Is a clever woman, and a witch besides. She'll be fine, and mostly will be worrying about you. Stay here, cousin, until the dawn.'

'What about you?'

Rallick turned about then, and a moment later Torvald sensed that someone else had joined them, and he too swung round.

Vorcan stood, wrapped in a thick grey cloak. 'The High Alchemist,' she said to Rallick, 'suggested we be close by . . . in case we are needed. The time, I believe, has come.'

Rallick nodded. 'Rooftops and wires, Mistress?'

She smiled. 'You make me nostalgic. Please, take the lead.'

And yes, Torvald comprehended all the subtle layers beneath those gentle words, and he was pleased. *Leave it to my cousin to find for himself the most dangerous woman alive. Well, then again, maybe I found myself the second most, especially if I forget to buy bread on my way home.*

Edging round the corner of the wall, an alley behind them, a street before them, Scorch and Leff paused. No point in being careless now, even though there'd be no attack from any assassins any time soon, unless of course they did breed fast as botflies, and Scorch wasn't sure if Leff had been joking with that, not sure at all.

The street was empty. No refugees, no guards, no murderous killers all bundled in black.

Most important of all: no Hounds.

'Damn,' hissed Leff, 'where are them beasts? What, you smell badder and worster than anyone else, Scorch? Is that the problem here? Shit, I want me a necklace of fangs. And maybe a paw to hang at my belt.'

'A paw? More like a giant club making you walk tilted over. Now, that'd be funny to see, all right. Worth getting a knock or two taking one of 'em down, just to see that. A Hound's paw, hah hah.'

'You said you wanted a skull!'

'Wasn't planning to wear it, though. To make me a boat, just flip it upside down, right? I could paddle round the lake.'

'Skulls don't float. Well, maybe yours would, being cork.'

They set out on to the street.

'I'd call it *Seahound*, what do you think?'

'More like *Sinkhound.'*

'You don't know anything you think you know, Leff. That's your problem. Always has been, always will be.'

'Wish there'd been twenty more of them assassins.'

'There were, just not attacking us. We was the diversion, that's what Tor said.'

'We diverted 'em, all right.'

At that moment a Hound of Shadow slunk into view, not twenty paces away. Its sides were heaving, strips of flesh hanging down trailing threads of blood. Its mouth was crusted with red foam. It swung its head and eyed them.

In unison, Scorch and Leff lifted their crossbows into vertical positions, and spat on the barbed heads. Then they slowly settled the weapons back

down, trained on the Hound.

Nostrils flaring, the beast flinched back. A moment later and it was gone.

'Shit!'

'I knew you smelled bad, damn you! We almost had it!'

'Wasn't me!'

'It's no fun wandering around with you, Scorch, no fun at all. Every chance we get, you go and mess it all up.'

'Not on purpose. I like doing fun stuff as much as you do, I swear it!'

'Next time,' muttered Leff. 'We shoot first and argue later.'

'Good idea. Next time. We'll do it right the next time.'

Beneath a moon that haunted him with terrifying memories, Cutter rode Coll's horse at a slow trot down the centre of the street. In one hand he gripped the lance, but it felt awkward, too heavy. Not a weapon he'd ever used, and yet something made him reluctant to abandon it.

He could hear the Hounds of Shadow, unleashed like demons in his poor city, and this too stirred images from the past, but these were bittersweet. For *she* was in them, a presence dark, impossibly soft. He saw once more every one of her smiles, rare as they had been, and they stung like drops of acid on his soul.

He had been so lost, from the very morning he awoke in the monastery to find her gone. Oh, he'd delivered his brave face, standing there beside a god and unwilling to see the sympathy in Cotillion's dark eyes. He had told himself that it was an act of courage to let her go, to give her the final decision. Courage and sacrifice.

He no longer believed that. There was no sacrifice made in being abandoned. There was no courage in doing nothing. Regardless of actual age, he had been so much younger than her. Young in that careless, senseless way. When thinking felt hard, unpleasant, until one learned to simply shy away from the effort, even as blind emotions raged, one

conviction after another raised high on the shining shield of truth. Or what passed for truth; and he knew now that whatever it had been, truth it was not. Blustery, belligerent stands, all those pious poses – they seemed so childish now, so pathetic. *I could have embraced the purest truth. Still, nobody would listen. The older you get, the thicker your walls. No wonder the young have grown so cynical. No wonder at all.*

Oh, she stood there still, a dark figure in his memories, the flash of eyes, the beginnings of a smile even as she turned away. And he could forget nothing.

At this moment, Challice, having ascended to the top of the estate tower – that ghoulish Gadrobi embarrassment – now stepped out on to the roof, momentarily buffeted by a gust of smoke. She held in her hands the glass globe in which shone the prisoner moon, and she paused, lifting her gaze, and stared in wonder at the destruction now filling a third of the sky.

*

But she had left him with bad habits. Terrible ones, and they had proceeded to shape his entire life. Cutter remembered the expression on Rallick's face – the shock and the dismay – as he looked down at the knife buried in his shoulder. The *recognition* – yes, Cutter was Apsalar's creation, through and through. Yes, another man had been lost.

It seemed wryly fitting that the moon was breaking into pieces in the night sky, but to find amusement in such a poignant symbol was proving a struggle. He did not possess Rallick's hardness, the layers of scar tissue worn like armour. And, for all that she had given him, Cutter was not her perfect reflection. He could not silence the anguish he felt inside, the legacy of delivering murder, making the notion of justice as unpalatable as a prisoner's gruel. And these were things she did not feel.

He rode on.

The Hounds knew him, he was sure of that, and if that meant anything on this night, then he had no reason to fear them.

The occasional refugee darted across his path. Like ousted rats, the desperate hunt for cover filled their minds, and the faces flashing past seemed empty of anything human. Survival was a fever, and it left eyes blank as those of a beached fish. Witnessing this, Cutter felt his heart breaking.

*This is my city. Darujhistan. Of the Blue Fires. It does not deserve this.*

No, he did not fear the Hounds of Shadow. But he now despised them. The devastation they were delivering was senseless, a pointless unleashing of destruction. He did not think Cotillion had anything at all to do with that. This stank of Shadowthrone, the fickleness, the cruel indifference. He had freed his beasts to play. In blood and snapped bones. In flames and collapsed tenements. All this fear, all this misery. *For nothing.*

Awkward or not, the lance felt reassuring in his hand. Now, if only Shadowthrone would show himself, why, he'd find a place to plant the damned thing.

There, within its tiny, perfect world, the moon shone pure, unsullied. There had been a time, she realized, when she too had been like that. Free of stains, not yet bowed to sordid compromise, feeling no need to shed this tattered skin, these glazed eyes.

Women and men were no different in the important things. They arrived with talents, with predispositions, with faces and bodies either attractive to others or not. And they all made do, in all the flavours of living, with whatever they possessed. And there were choices, for each and every one of them. For some, a few of those choices were easier than others, when the lure of being desirable was not a conceit, when it reached out an inviting hand and all at once it seemed to offer the simplest path. So little effort was involved, merely a smile and thighs that did not resist parting.

But there was no going back. These stains didn't wash off. The moon shone pure and beautiful, but it remained for ever trapped.

She stared up into the sky, watched how fragments spun out from a fast-darkening core. The momentum seemed to have slowed, and indeed, she

thought she could see pieces falling back, inward, whilst dust flattened out, as if transformed into a spear that pierced all that was left of the moon.

> *The dust dreams of the world it had once been. But the dust, alas, does not command the wind.*

Cutter knew now that he had – since her – taken into his arms two women as if they were capable of punishing him, each in turn. Only one had succeeded, and he rode towards her now, to stand before her and tell her that he had murdered her husband. Not because she had asked him to, because, in truth, she did not have that sort of hold over him, and never would. No, Gorlas Vidikas was dead for other reasons, the specifics of which were not relevant.

She was free, he would say. To do as she pleased. But whatever that would be, he would tell her, her future would not – could never – include him.

*'See, there he is, at her side. What gall! Kills her husband and now she hangs on his arm. Oh, made for each other, those two. And may Hood find them the deepest pit, and soon.'*

He could face that down, if need be. But he would not subject her to such a fate. Not even for love could he do that.

He had returned to his city, only to lose it for ever.

This journey to Challice would be his last. By dawn he would be gone. Darujhistan would not miss him.

She looked down once more at the imprisoned moon cupped in her hands. And here, she realized, was her childhood in all its innocence. Frozen, timeless, and for ever beyond her reach. She need only let her gaze sink in, to find all that she had once been. Cursed with beauty, blessed with health and vigour, the glow of promise—

*Dust of dreams, will you now command the wind?*

*Dust of dreams, is it not time to set you free?*

It was easy, then, to climb up on to the low wall, to stare down at the garden flagstones far below. Easy, yes, to set it all free.

Together, they plummeted through the smoky air, and when they struck, the globe shattered, the tiny moon flung loose to sparkle briefly in the air. Before twinkling out.

Dreams will not linger, but their dust rides the winds for ever.

Kruppe is no stranger to sorrow. The round man need only look at his own waistline to grasp the tragedies of past excesses, and understand that all the things that come to pass will indeed come to pass. Heart so heavy he must load it into a wheelbarrow (or nearly so), and with not a single sly wink to offer, he leaves the grim confines of the Phoenix Inn and commences the torrid trek to the stables, where he attends to his sweet-natured mule, deftly avoiding its snapping bites and lashing kicks.

The moon's face has broken apart into a thousand glittering eyes. Nothing can hide and all is seen. All can see that there is nothing left to hide. Dread clash is imminent.

The vast pressure snuffs blazing fires as would a thumb and finger a candle wick, *snuff!* Here and there and elsewhere, too. But this blessing is borne with harsh, cruel burden. A god has died, a pact been sealed, and in a street where onlookers now gather at the very edges, a most honourable man sits hunched over his knees, head bowed low. The wind takes ethereal chains emerging from the sword in his hands, and tugs them, tears at them, shreds them into ghostly nothings that drift up only to vanish in the smoke enwreathing the city.

Will he rise again?

Can he answer this final challenge?

What sort of man is this? This white-maned Tiste Andii whose hands remain stained with a brother's blood, a people's vast loss?

Ah, but look closely. The core burns still, hot and pure, and it gathers unto itself, bound by indomitable will. He will take the wounds of the heart, for

Anomander Rake is the sort of man who sees no other choice, who accepts no other choice.

Still. For now, grant him a few more moments of peace.

The round man rides out into Darujhistan.

There are temptations, and to some they can prove, ah, overwhelming. If need be, the round man can prove a most blunt barrier.

Just ask the man with the hammer.

As a warrior walked alone – in his wake a Toblakai and a witch, on the flanks three, now four Hounds of Shadow – an ox and cart drew to a halt outside an estate. The two men leading it separated, one heading to the back of the cart to set a trembling hand upon a chest – terrified that he might find it still, silent – and a moment later a faint sob broke free, but it was one of relief. The other man hurried up to the postern gate and tugged on a braided cord.

He ducked upon hearing the heavy flap of feathered wings overhead, and glared upward, but saw nothing but a thick, impenetrable layer of smoke. He twitched as he waited, muttering under his breath.

The door creaked open.

'Master Baruk! I am glad it's you and not one of your damned servants – getting past them is impossible. Listen, we have a hurt man – bad hurt – who needs healing. We'll pay—'

'Sergeant—'

'Just Antsy these days, sir.'

'Antsy, I am so sorry, but I must refuse you—'

At that, Barathol came round the cart and marched up, his hands curling into fists for a moment, before loosening as he reached towards the huge axe slung across his back. But these gestures were instinctive – he was not even aware of them, and when he spoke it was in a tone of despairing fury.

'His skull is fractured! He'll die without healing – *and I will not accept that!'*

Baruk held up both hands. 'I was about to leave – I cannot delay any longer. Certain matters demand my immediate attention—'

'He needs—'

'I am sorry, Barathol.'

And the alchemist was backing through the gate once more. The panel clicked shut.

Antsy snatched and tugged at his moustache in agitation, and then reached out to restrain Barathol, who seemed about to kick down that door. 'Hold on, hold on – I got another idea. It's desperate, but I can't think of anything else. Come on, it's not far.'

Barathol was too distraught to say anything – he would grasp any hope, no matter how forlorn. Face ashen, he went back to the ox, and when Antsy set out, he and the ox and the cart bearing the body of Chaur followed.

In the stricken man's mind, few sparks remained. The black tide was very nearly done. Those flickers that knew themselves as Chaur had each lost touch with the others, and so wandered lost. But then, some of them had known only solitary existences throughout their lives – crucial sparks indeed – for ever blind to pathways that might have awakened countless possibilities.

Until one, drifting untethered, so strangely freed, now edged forward along a darkened path it had never before explored, and the track it burned remained vibrant in its wake. And then, in a sudden flaring, that spark found another of its kind.

Something stirred then, there in the midst of an inner world fast dying.

Awareness.

Recognition.

A tumbling complexity of thoughts, connections, relationships, meanings.

Flashing, stunned with its own existence, even as the blackness closed in on all sides.

Cutting down an alley away from Baruk's estate, Antsy, ten paces in the lead, stumbled suddenly on something. Swearing, he glanced back at the small object lying on the cobbles, and then bent down to collect it, stuffing the limp thing into his cloak.

He swore again, something about a *stink, but what's a dead nose gonna know or care?* And then he resumed walking.

They arrived at an estate that Barathol recognized. Coll's. And Antsy returned to help lead the suddenly uneasy ox down the side track, to that primordial thicket behind the garden wall. Beneath the branches the gloom was thick with flying moths, their wings a chorus of dry whispering. Fog crawled between the boles of twisted trees. The air was rich with a steamy, earthy smell.

Tears ran down Barathol's cheeks, soaked his beard. 'I told him to stay on the ship,' he said in a tight, distraught voice. 'He usually listens to me. He's not one to disobey, not Chaur. Was it Spite? Did she force him out?'

'What was he doing at the gaol?' Antsy asked, just to keep his friend talking for reasons even he could not explain. 'How did he even find it, unless someone led him there? It's all a damned mystery.'

'He saved my life,' said Barathol. 'He was coming to break me out – he had my axe. Chaur, you fool, why didn't you just leave it all alone?'

'He couldn't do that,' said Antsy.

'I know.'

They arrived at the edge of the clearing, halting just beyond a low, uneven stone wall almost buried beneath vines. The gateway was an arch of rough stone veined with black roots. The house beyond showed a blackened face.

'Let's do this, then,' said Antsy in a growl, coming round to the back of the cart. 'Before the ox bolts—'

'What are we doing?'

'We're carrying him up the path. Listen, Barathol, we got to stay on that path, you understand? Not one step off it, not one. Understand?'

'No—'

'This is the Finnest House, Barathol. It's an Azath.'

The ex-sergeant seemed to be standing within a cloud of rotting meat. Moths swarmed in a frenzy.

Confused, frightened, Barathol helped Antsy lift Chaur's body from the cart bed, and with the Falari in the lead and walking backwards – one tender step at a time – they made their way up the flagstone path.

'You know,' Antsy said between gasps – for Chaur was a big man, and, limp as he was, it was no easy thing carrying him – 'I was thinking. If the damned moon can just break apart like that, who's to say that can't happen to our own world? We could just be—'

'Be quiet,' snapped Barathol. 'I don't give a shit about the moon – it's been trying to kill me for some time. Careful, you're almost there.'

'Right, set him down then, easy, on the stones . . . aye, that'll do.'

Antsy stepped up to the door, reached for the knife at his belt and then swore. 'I lost my knife, too. I can't believe this!' He made a fist and pounded against the wood.

The sound that made was reminiscent of punching a wall of meat. No reverberation, no echoes.

'Ow, that hurt.'

They waited.

Sighing, Antsy prepared to knock a second time, but then something clunked on the other side of the barrier, and a moment later the door swung back with a loud squeal.

The tall, undead monstrosity filled the doorway. Empty, shadow-drowned eye sockets regarded them – or not; it was impossible to tell.

Antsy shifted from one foot to the other. 'You busy, Raest? We need to make use of the hallway floor behind you—'

'Oh yes, I am very busy.'

The Falari blinked. 'Really?'

'Dust breeds. Cobwebs thicken. Candle wax stains precious surfaces. What do you want?'

Antsy glanced back at Barathol. 'Oh, a corpse with a sense of humour, what do you know? And surprise, it's so *droll.'* He faced the Jaghut again and smiled. 'In case you ain't noticed, the whole city has gone insane – that's why I figured you might be suffering some—'

'I am sorry,' cut in Raest, 'is something happening?'

Antsy's eyes bulged slightly. 'The Hounds of Shadow are loose!'

Raest leaned forward as if to scan the vicinity, and then settled back once more. 'Not in my yard.'

Antsy clawed through his hair. 'Trust me, then, it's a bad night – now, if you'd just step back—'

'Although, come to think of it, I did have a visitor earlier this evening.'

'What? Oh, well, I'm happy for you, but—' Raest lifted one desiccated hand and pointed.

Antsy and Barathol turned. And there, in the yard, there was a fresh mound of raw earth, steaming. Vines were visibly snaking over it. 'Gods below,' the Falari whispered, making a warding gesture with one hand.

'A T'lan Imass with odd legs,' said Raest. 'It seemed to harbour some dislike towards me.' The Jaghut paused. 'I can't imagine why.'

Antsy grunted. 'It should've stayed on the path.'

'What do T'lan Imass know of footpaths?' Raest asked. 'In any case, it's still too angry for a conversation.' Another pause. 'But there's time. Soldier,

you have been remiss. I am therefore disinclined to yield the floor, as it were.'

'Like Hood I have!' And Antsy reached beneath his tunic and tugged out a bedraggled, half-rotted shape. 'I found you your damned white cat!'

'Oh, so you have. How sweet. In that case,' Raest edged back, 'do come in.'

Barathol hesitated. 'What will this achieve, Antsy?'

'He won't die,' the ex-sergeant replied. 'It's like time doesn't exist in there. Trust me. We can find us a proper healer tomorrow, or a month from now – it don't matter. S'long as he's breathing when we carry him across the threshold. So, come on, help me.' He then realized he was still clutching the dead cat, and so he went up to the Jaghut and thrust the ghastly thing into most welcoming arms.

'I shall call it Tufty,' said Raest.

The black tide ceased its seemingly inexorable crawl. A slow, shallow breath held half drawn. A struggling heart hovered in mid-beat. And yet that spark of awareness, suddenly emboldened, set out on a journey of exploration and discovery. So many long-dark pathways . . .

*Dragnipur has drunk deep, so deep.*

*Dragnipur, sword of the father and slayer of the same. Sword of Chains, Gate of Darkness, wheeled burden of life and life ever flees dissolution and so it must! Weapon of edges, caring naught who wields it. Cut indifferent, cut blind, cut when to do so is its very purpose, its perfect function.*

*Dragnipur.*

Dread sisterly feuds dwindled in significance – something was proffered, something was almost within reach. Matters of final possession could be worked out later, at leisure in some wrought-iron, oversized bath-tub filled to the brim with hot blood.

Temporary pact. Expedience personified, Spite quelled, Envy in abeyance.

In their wake a crater slowly sagged, edges toppling inward, heat fast dissipating. The melted faces of buildings turned glassy in rainbow hues. For now the brilliance of these colours was but hinted at in this moon-glow. But that reflected light had begun a thousand new games, hinting at something far deadlier. Still to come, still to come.

Everywhere in the city, fires ebbed.

*The pressure of Dragnipur Unsheathed starves the flames of destruction. Darkness is anathema to such forces, after all.*

*Yes, salvation found, in a weapon let loose.*

The sisters were mad, but not so mad as to fail to grasp the pleasing irony of such things.

Quell the violence.

Invite murder.

He was in no condition to resist them – not both of them – extraordinary that such an alliance had not occurred long before this night. But sibling wounds are the festering kind, and natures at war are normally blind to every pacifying gesture. What was needed was the proper incentive.

Alas, it did not occur to either twin that their father understood all too well the potential danger of his daughters forged together in alliance. And in shaping them – as carefully, as perfectly as he shaped Dragnipur itself – he had done what he could to mitigate the risk.

And so, as they walked side by side up the street, in Spite's mind she had already begun scheming her fateful stab into her sister's back. While Envy amused herself with virtually identical thoughts, roles reversed, naturally.

First things first, however.

They would kill Anomander Rake.

*For Dragnipur has drunk deep, so very deep . . .*

'Karsa, *please.'*

Ashes drifted in the air, amidst foul smoke. Distant screams announced tragic scenes. The last night of the Gedderone Fête was sinking into misery and suffering.

'There is nothing to be done, Samar Dev. But we will do this – we will *witness.* We will withstand the cost of that, if we can.'

She had not expected such uncertainty in the Toblakai. Always a stranger to humility, or so he seemed to her. He had not even drawn his flint sword.

They were twenty-five paces behind Traveller. They could see an angled gate arching over the broad street as it sloped upward, a hundred paces ahead. But the warrior they tracked had slowed his steps. There was something – someone – in the centre of the street in front of Traveller. And silent crowds on both sides – crowds that flinched back as the Hounds lumbered into view; flinched, but did not flee.

Something held them in place, something stronger than fear.

Samar Dev sensed the pressure sliding past, like a wind sweeping round her, drawing inward once more – straight into that huddled figure, who now, at last, stirred.

Traveller stood, six or so paces away from the stranger, 1176 and watched in silence as the man slowly straightened.

*Tiste Andii.*

Silver-haired. In his hands, a sword trailing ghostly chains . . . *oh . . . spirits below, oh, no—*

Traveller spoke. 'He said you would stand in my way.' That voice carried, strong as waves surging against a dark shore.

Samar Dev's heart stuttered.

When Anomander Rake replied, his words were cold, solid and unyielding, 'What else did he tell you?'

Traveller shook his head. 'Where is he?' he demanded. 'I can feel – he's close. Where is he?'

*Not Cotillion. A different 'he' this time. The one Traveller seeks. The one he has ever sought.*

'Yes,' said Rake. 'Close.'

Thick, flapping sounds, drifting in from the smoky night sky. She looked up in alarm and saw Great Ravens. Landing upon roof ledges. Scores, hundreds, silent but for the beat of air beneath crooked wings. Gathering, gathering, along the arched gate and the sections of wall to either side. Landing everywhere, *so long as it's a place from which they can see.*

'Then stand aside,' commanded Traveller.

'I cannot.'

'Dammit, Rake, you are not my enemy.'

The Son of Darkness tilted his head, as if receiving a compliment, an unexpected gift.

'Rake. You have *never* been my enemy. You know that. Even when the Empire . . .'

'I know, Dassem. I know.'

'He said this would happen.' There was dismay in that statement, and resignation.

Rake made no reply.

'He said,' continued Dassem, 'that you would not yield.'

'No, I will not yield.'

'Please help me, Rake, help me to understand . . . *why?'*

'I am not here to help you, Dassem Ultor.' And Samar Dev heard genuine regret in that admission. The Son of Darkness closed both hands about the long grip of Dragnipur and, angling the pommel upward and to his right, slowly widened his stance. 'If you so want Hood,' he said, *'come and get him.'*

Dassem Ultor – the First Sword of the Malazan Empire – *who was supposed to be dead. As if Hood would even want this one* – Dassem Ultor, the one they had known as Traveller, unsheathed his sword, the water-etched blade flashing as if lapped by molten silver. Samar Dev's sense of a rising wave now burgeoned in her mind. *Two forces. Sea and stone, sea and stone.*

Among the onlookers to either side, a deep, soft chant had begun.

Samar Dev stared at those arrayed faces, the shining eyes, the mouths moving in unison. *Gods below, the cult of Dessembrae. These are cultists – and they stand facing their god.*

And that chant, yes, it was a murmuring, it was the cadence of deep water rising. Cold and hungry.

Samar Dev saw Anomander Rake's gaze settle briefly on Dassem's sword, and it seemed a sad smile showed itself, in the instant before Dassem attacked.

To all who witnessed – the cultists, Samar Dev, Karsa Orlong, even unto the five Hounds of Shadow and the Great Ravens hunched on every ledge – that first clash of weapons was too fast to register. Sparks slanted, the night air rang with savage parries, counter-blows, the biting crunch of edges against cross-hilts. Even their bodies were but a blur.

And then both warriors staggered back, opening up the distance between them once more.

'Faces in the Rock,' hissed Karsa Orlong.

'Karsa—'

'No. Only a fool would step between these two.'

And the Toblakai sounded . . . *shaken.*

Dassem launched himself forward again. There were no war cries, no bellowed curses, not even the grunts bursting free as ferocious swings hammered forged iron. But the swords had begun singing, a dreadful, mournful pair of voices rising in eerie syncopation. Thrusts, slashes,

lowedged ripostes, the whistle of a blade cutting through air where a head had been an instant earlier, bodies writhing to evade counter-strokes, and sparks rained, poured, from the two combatants, bounced like shattered stars across the cobbles.

They did not break apart this time. The frenzied flurry did not abate, but went on, impossibly on. Two forces, neither yielding, neither prepared to draw a single step back.

And yet, for all the blinding speed, the glowing shower spraying out like the blood of iron, Samar Dev saw the death blow. She saw it clear. She saw its undeniable truth – and somehow, *somehow*, it was *all wrong.*

Rake wide-legged, angling the pommel high before his face with Dragnipur's point downward – as if to echo his opening stance – and higher still, and Dassem, his free hand joining the other upon his sword's grip, throwing his entire weight into a crossways slash – the warrior bodily lifting as if about to take to the air and close upon Rake with an embrace. And his swing met the edge of Dragnipur at a full right angle – a single moment shaping a perfect cruciform fashioned by the two weapons' colliding, and then the power of Dassem's blow slammed Dragnipur back—

Driving its inside edge into Anomander Rake's forehead, and then down through his face.

His gauntleted hands sprang away from the handle, yet Dragnipur remained jammed, seeming to erupt from his head, as he toppled backward, blood streaming down to flare from the tip as the Son of Darkness crashed down on his back.

Even this impact did not dislodge Dragnipur. The sword shivered, and now there was but one song, querulous and fading in the sudden stillness.

Blood boiled, turned black. The body lying on the cobbles did not move. Anomander Rake was dead.

Dassem Ultor slowly lowered his weapon, his chest heaving.

And then he cried out, in a voice so filled with anguish that it seemed to tear a jagged hole in the night air. This unhuman scream was joined by a

chorus of shrieks as the Great Ravens exploded into flight, lifting like a massive feathered veil that whirled above the street, and then began a spinning descent. Cultists flinched away and crouched against building walls, their wordless chant drowned beneath the caterwauling cacophony of this black, glistening shroud that swept down like a curtain.

Dassem staggered back, and then pitched drunkenly to one side, his sword dragging in his wake, point skirling a snake track across the cobbles. He was brought up short by a pitted wall, and he sagged against it, burying his face in the shelter of a crooked arm that seemed to be all that held him upright.

*Broken. Broken. They are broken.*

*Oh, gods forgive them, they are broken.*

Karsa Orlong shocked her then, as he twisted to one side and pointedly spat on to the street. 'Cheated,' he said. 'Cheated!'

She stared at him, aghast. She did not know what he meant – but no, she did. Yes, she did. 'Karsa, what just happened?' *Wrong. It was wrong.* 'I saw – I saw—'

'You saw true,' he said, baring his teeth, his gaze fixed upon that fallen body. 'As did Traveller, and *see what it has done to him.'*

The area surrounding the corpse of Anomander Rake churned with Great Ravens – although not one drew close enough to touch the cooling flesh – and now the five Hounds of Shadow, not one spared of wounds, closed in to push the birds aside, as if to form a protective circle around Anomander Rake.

*No, not him. The sword . . .*

Unease stirred awake in Samar Dev. 'This is not over.'

A beast can sense weakness. A beast knows the moment of vulnerability, and opportunity. A beast knows when to strike.

The moon died and, in dying, began its torturous rebirth. The cosmos is indifferent to the petty squabbles of what crawls, what whimpers, what

bleeds and what breathes. It has flung out its fates on the strands of immutable laws, and in the skirling unravelling of millions of years, tens of millions, each fate will out. In its time, it will out.

Something massive had arrived from the depths of the blackness beyond and struck the moon a short time back. An initial eruption from the impact had briefly showered the moon's companion world with fragments, but it was the shock-wave that delivered the stricken moon's death knell, and this took time. Deep in the core, vast tides of energy opened immense fissures. Concussive forces shattered the crust. Energy was absorbed until nothing more could be borne. The moon blew apart.

Leave it to the flit of eager minds to find prophetic significance. The cosmos does not care. The fates will not crack a smile.

From a thousand sources, now, reflected sunlight danced wild upon the blue, green and ochre world far below. Shadows were devoured, darkness flushed away. Night itself broke into fragments.

In the city of Darujhistan, light was everywhere, like a god's fingers. Brushing, prodding, poking, driving down into alleys that had never seen the sun. And each assault shattered darkness and shadow both. Each invasion *ignited*, in a proclamation of power.

Dearest serendipity, yet not an opportunity to be ignored, no. Not on this night. Not in the city of Darujhistan.

Pallid and Lock, their bone-white hides sprayed in crimson, their skin hanging in strips in places, with horrid puncture wounds red-rimmed black holes in their necks and elsewhere, padded side by side down the main avenue running parallel to the lake shore. Hurting, but undaunted.

Light bloomed, ran like water across their path.

Light tilted shafts down between buildings, and some of these flashed, and from those flashes more Hounds emerged.

Behold, the Hounds of Light have arrived.

What, the world shifts unexpectedly? Without hint, without inkling? How terrible, how unexpected! How perfectly . . . natural. Rules abound, laws carved into stones, but they are naught but delusions. Witness the ones who do not care. See the mocking awareness in their fiery eyes. Rail at the unknown, even as jaws open wide for the warbling throat.

But give the round man no grief. He spreads wide pudgy hands. He shrugs. He saves his sly smile for . . . why, for thee!

Venasara and Cast were the first to join Pallid and Lock. Cast was almost twice the weight of Lock, while Venasara still bore the signs of the ordeals of raising a squabble of young. Ultama soon arrived, long-limbed, sleek, broad head held low at the end of a sinewy neck. Ultama's oversized upper canines jutted down. The exposed portions of the fangs, dagger-length, gleamed white.

At an intersection ahead waited Jalan, Grasp and Hanas, the youngest three of the pack, hackles high and eyes flashing with vicious excitement.

Gait and then Ghennan were the last to arrive, the lord and the lady of the pack, more silver than white, with scarred muzzles misshapen by centuries of dread battle. These two wore thick collars of black leather scattered with pearls and opals – although far fewer than had once adorned these proud bands.

Ten in number. Each one a match for any Hound of Shadow.

Of whom there were, ah, but five.

No one stepped into the path of these beasts. They were coming to claim a prize for their master.

Dragnipur. A sword of perfect justice.

*Such perfect justice.*

High in the sky above the city, tilting, sliding and dipping to avoid each shaft of infernal light, an undead dragon tracked the Hounds of Light.

Tulas Shorn was not pleased, even as something flowed sweet as a stream through its mind. A kind of blessing, alighting with faint, lilting notes of

wonder.

Tulas Shorn had never known that Hood, Lord of the Slain, could prove so . . . generous.

Or perhaps it was nothing more than a Jaghut's talent for anticipating the worst.

As an Elder might observe, there is nothing worse than a suspicious dragon.

Do not grieve. Hold close such propensities for a while longer. The time will come.

Some gifts are evil. Others are not, but *what* they are remains to be discovered.

Rest easy for the next few moments, for there is more to tell.

Iskaral Pust rode like a madman. Unfortunately, the mule beneath him had decided that a plodding walk would suffice, making the two of them a most incongruous pair. The High Priest flung himself back and forth, pitched from side to side. His feet kicked high, toes skyward, then lashed back down. Heels pounded insensate flanks in a thumping drum-roll entirely devoid of rhythm. Reins flailed about but the mule had chewed through the bit and so the reins were attached to nothing but two mangled stumps that seemed determined to batter Pust senseless.

He tossed about as if riding a goaded bull. Spraying sweat, lips pulled back in a savage grimace, the whites visible round his bugged-out eyes.

The mule, why, the mule walked. Clump clump (pause) clump (pause) clump clump. And so on.

Swirling just above Iskaral Pust's head, and acrobatically avoiding the bit-ends, flapped the squall of bhokarala. Like oversized gnats, and how that mule's tail whipped back and forth! She sought to swat them away, but in the spirit of gnat-hood the bhokarala did not relent, so eager were they to claim the very next plop of dung wending its way out beneath that tail. Over which they'd fight tooth, talon and claw.

Swarming in mule and rider's wake was a river of spiders, flowing glittering black over the cobbles.

At one point three white Hounds tramped across the street not twenty paces distant. A trio of immensely ugly heads swung to regard mule and rider. And to show that it meant business, the mule propped up its ears. Clump clump (pause) clump clump clump.

The Hounds moved on.

It does no good to molest a mule.

Alas, as Iskaral Pust and his placid mount were moments from discovering, there were indeed forces in the world that could confound both.

And here then, at last, arrives the shining, blazing, astonishing nexus, the penultimate pinnacle of this profound night, as bold Kruppe nudges his ferocious warmule into the path of one Iskaral Pust, mule, and sundry spiders and bhokarala.

Mule sees mule. Both halt with a bare fifteen paces between them, ears at bristling attention.

Rider sees rider. Magus grows dangerously still, eyes hooded. Kruppe waves one plump hand in greeting.

Bhokarala launch a mid-air conference that results in one beast landing awkwardly on the cobbles to the left of the High Priest, whilst the others find window sills, projections, and the heads of handsome gargoyles on which to perch, chests heaving and tongues lolling.

The spiders run away.

Thus, the tableau is set.

'Out of my way!' screeched Iskaral Pust. 'Who is this fool and how dare he fool with me? I'll gnash him! I'll crush him down. I'll feint right and dodge left and we'll be by in a flash! Look at that pathetic mule – he'll never catch us! I got a sword to claim. Mine, yes, mine! And then won't Shadowthrone grovel and simper! Iskaral Pust, High Priest of Dragnipur! Most feared

swordsman in ten thousand worlds! And if you think you've seen justice at its most fickle, you just wait!' He then leaned forward and smiled. 'Kind sir, could you kindly move yourself and yon beast to one side? I must keep an appointment, you understand. Hastily, in fact.' Then he hissed, 'Go climb up your own arse, you red-vested ball of lard that someone rolled across a forest floor! Go! Scat!'

'Most confounding indeed,' Kruppe replied with his most beatific smile. 'It seems we are in discord, in that you seek to proceed in a direction that will inevitably collide with none other than Kruppe, the Eel of Darujhistan. Poor priest, it is late. Does your god know where you are?'

'Eel? Kruppe? Collide? Fat and an idiot besides, what a dastardly combination, and on this of all nights! Listen, take another street. If I run into this Crappy Eel I'll be sure to let him know you're looking for him. It's the least I can do.'

'Hardly, but no matter. I am Kruppe the Crappy Eel, alas.'

'So fine, we've run into each other. Glad that's over with. Now let me pass!'

'Kruppe regrets that any and every path you may seek shall be impeded by none other than Kruppe himself. Unless, of course, you conclude that what you seek is not worth the effort, nor the grief certain to follow, and so wisely return to thy shadowy temple.'

'You don't know what I want so it's none of your damned business what I want!'

'Misapprehensions abound, but wait, does this slavering fool even understand?'

'What? I wasn't supposed to hear that? But I did! I did, you fat idiot!'

'He only thought he heard. Kind priest, Kruppe assures you, you did not hear but mishear. Kind priest? Why, Kruppe is too generous, too forgiving by far, and hear hear! Or is it here here? No matter, it's not as if this grinning toad will understand. Why, his mule's got a sharper look in its eye

than he has. Now, kindly priest, it's late and you should be in bed, yes? Abjectly alone, no doubt. Hmm?'

Iskaral Pust stared. He gaped. His eyes darted, alighting on the bhokaral squatting on the cobbles beside him as it made staring, gaping, darting expressions. 'My worshippers! Of course! You! Yes, you! Gather your kin and attack the fat fool! Attack! Your god commands you! Attack!'

'Mlawhlaoblossblayowblagmilebbingoblaiblblafblablallblayarblablabnablahblallblah!' 'What?'

'Bla?'

'Bla?'

'Yarb?'

'Bah! You're stupid and useless and ugly!'

'Blabluablablablahllalalabala, too!'

Iskaral Pust scowled at it.

The bhokaral scowled back.

'Rat poison!' Pust hissed. And then smiled.

The bhokaral offered him a dung sausage. And then smiled.

*

Oh, so much for reasoned negotiation.

Iskaral Pust's warbling battle cry was somewhat strangled as he leaned forward, perched high in the stirrups, hands reaching like a raptor's talons, and the mule reluctantly stumped forward.

Kruppe watched this agonizingly slow charge. He sighed. 'Really now. It comes to this? So be it.' And he kicked his war-mule into motion.

The beasts closed, step by step. By step.

Iskaral Pust clawed the air, weaving and pitching, head bobbing. Overhead, the bhokarala screamed and flew in frenzied circles. The High

Priest's mule flicked its tail.

Kruppe's war-mule edged to the right. Pust's beast angled to *its* right. Their heads came alongside, and then their shoulders. Whereupon they halted.

Snarling and spitting, Iskaral Pust launched himself at Kruppe, who grunted a surprised *oof!* Fists flew, thumbs jabbed, jaws snapped – the High Priest's crazed attack – and the Eel threw up his forearms to fend it off, only to inadvertently punch Pust in the nose with one pudgy hand. Head rocked back, a stunned gasp. Attack renewed.

They grappled. They toppled, thumping on to the cobbles in a flurry of limbs.

The bhokarala joined in, diving from above with screeches and snarls, swarming the two combatants before beginning to fight with each other. Fists flying, thumbs jabbing, jaws snapping. Spiders swept in from all sides, tiny fangs nipping everything in sight.

The entire mass writhed and seethed.

The two mules walked a short distance away, then turned in unison to watch the proceedings.

Best leave this egregious scene for now.

Honest.

When the two women appeared some distance down a side avenue, dressed in diaphanous robes, and approached side by side with elegant grace – like noble-born sisters out for a late night stroll – the Great Ravens scattered, shrieking, and the Hounds of Shadow drew up, hackles rising and lips stretching back to reveal glistening fangs.

Even at this distance, Samar Dev could feel the power emanating from them. She stepped back, her chest tightening. 'Who in Hood's name are they?'

When Karsa did not reply she glanced over to see that he was watching a lone horseman coming up from the lakefront. This rider held a lance and the

moment her eyes alit upon that weapon she drew a sharp, ragged breath. *Gods, now what?*

The horse's hoofs echoed like a cracked temple bell.

Ignoring the rider, the Hounds of Shadow set out in the direction of the two women. The five enormous beasts moved warily, heads held low.

At this moment, High Alchemist Baruk stood beside his carriage in the estate compound. It might have seemed to the servants and guards watching that he was studying the crazed night sky, but none of these worthies was positioned to see anything of his face.

The man was weeping.

He did not see the shattered moon. Nor the wreaths of low smoke drifting past. In truth, he saw nothing that anyone else could possibly see, for his vision was turned inward, upon memories of friendship, upon burdens since accepted, and, through it all, there was a rising flood of *something* – he could not be certain, but he believed it was humility.

In the course of a life, sacrifices are made, dire legacies accepted. Burdens are borne upon a humble back, or they ride the shoulders of bitter martyrs. These are the choices available to the spirit. There was no doubt, none at all, as to which one had been chosen by the Son of Darkness.

A great man was dead. So much cruelly taken away on this sour night.

And he had lost a friend.

It availed him nothing that he understood, that he accepted that so many other choices were made, and that he had his own role still to play out in this tragic end.

No, he simply felt broken inside.

Everything seemed thin, fragile. All that he felt in his heart, all that he saw with his eyes. So very fragile.

Yes, the moon died, but a rebirth was coming.

Could he hold to that?

He would try.

For now, however, all he could manage were these tears.

Baruk turned to his carriage, stepped inside. The door was shut behind him as he settled on the cushioned bench. He looked across to his guest, but could say nothing. Not to this one, who had lost so much more than he had. *So much more.*

The gates were opened and the carriage set out, its corner lanterns swinging.

Cutter dismounted, leaving the horse to wander where it would. He walked forward, indifferent to the presence of the Hounds – they seemed intent on something else in any case – and indifferent as well to the Great Ravens as they drove onlookers away with beaks eager to stab and slash. His eyes were on the body lying on the cobbles.

He walked past a woman who stood beside a towering warrior who was drawing loose a two-handed flint sword as he stared at something in the direction from whence Cutter had just come.

None of these details could drag Cutter's attention from the body, and that gleaming black sword so brutally driven into the head and face. He walked until he stood over it.

The woman moved up beside him. 'That weapon in your hands – it's not —'

'We are in trouble,' Cutter said.

'What?'

He could not believe what he was seeing. Could not accept that the Lord of Moon's Spawn was lying here, one eye closed, the other open and staring sightlessly. Killed by his own sword. Killed . . . *taken.* By Dragnipur. 'How did this happen? Who could have . . .'

'Dassem Ultor.'

He finally looked at her. She was Seven Cities, that much he could see at once. Older than Cutter by a decade, maybe more. 'The name's familiar, but . . .' He shrugged.

She pointed to one side and Cutter turned.

A man was crouched, slumped against a wall, a sword propped up beside him. He had buried his face in his arms. Cutter's eyes went back to that sword. *I've seen that thing before . . . but where? When?*

'He was known to us,' said the woman, 'as Traveller.'

Memories rushed through Cutter, leaving in their wake something cold, lifeless. 'It's not the same,' he whispered. 'Vengeance. Or grief. Your choice.' He drew an uneven breath. 'That sword – it was forged by Anomander Rake. It was his weapon. Before Dragnipur. He left it with his brother, Andarist. And then I . . . I . . . *Beru fend* . . .'

The giant warrior now twisted round. 'If you would protect that body,' he said in a growl, 'then ready that spear.'

The two women had halted a street away, their path blocked by a half-circle of Hounds, with less than twenty paces separating the parties.

Seeing those women, Cutter frowned. 'Spite,' he muttered. 'Did you guess? Or was it just some damned itch?'

'Samar Dev,' snapped the giant. *'Witch!* Get Traveller on his feet! I will need him!'

*'Damn you!'* screamed the woman beside Cutter. *'What is it?'*

But there was no need for an answer. For she saw now, as did Cutter.

More Hounds, these ones pale as ghosts, a pack twice the number of the Hounds of Shadow. Loping up the street from Lakefront, moments from a charge.

'It's the sword,' said the woman named Samar Dev. 'They've come for the sword.'

Cutter felt his limbs turn to ice, even as the lance in his hands flared with heat.

'Give me room,' said the giant, lumbering forward into a clear space.

*Against ten Hounds? Are you mad?*

Cutter moved out to the left of the warrior. The witch rushed over to Traveller.

The lance trembled. It was getting too hot to hold, but what else did he have? Some damned daggers – against these things? *Gods, what am I even doing here?*

But he would stand. He would die here, beside a giant – who was just as doomed. And for what? *There is nothing . . . there is nothing in my life. To explain any of this.* He glared at the white Hounds. *It's just a sword. What will you even do with it? Chew the handle? Piss on the blade?* He looked across at the huge warrior beside him. 'What's your name at least?'

The giant glanced at him. 'Yes,' he said with a sharp nod. 'I am Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. Toblakai. And you?'

'Crokus. Crokus Younghand.' He hesitated, then said, 'I was once a thief.'

'Be one again,' said Karsa, teeth bared, 'and steal me a Hound's life this night.'

*Shit.* 'I'll try.'

'That will do,' the Toblakai replied.

Thirty paces away now. And the white Hounds fanned out, filled the street in a wall of bleached hide, rippling muscle and rows of fangs.

A gust of charnel wind swept round Cutter; something clattered, rang sharp on cobbles, and then a hand swept down—

The Hounds of Light charged.

As, on the side street to the left, the daughters of Draconus unleashed their warrens in a howling rush of destruction that engulfed the five beasts

before them.

*

Scything blade of notched iron, driving Spinnock Durav back. Blood sprayed with each blow, links of ringed armour pattered on the ground. So many tiny broken chains, there was a trail of them, marking each step of the warrior's rocking, reeling retreat. When his own sword caught Kallor's frenzied blows, the reverberation ripped up Spinnock's arm, seeming to mash his muscles into lifeless pulp.

His blood was draining away from countless wounds. His helm had been battered off, that single blow leaving behind a fractured cheekbone and a deaf ear.

Still he fought on; still he held Kallor before him.

*Kallor.*

There was no one behind the High King's eyes. The berserk rage had devoured the ancient warrior. He seemed tireless, an automaton. Spinnock Durav could find no opening, no chance to counter-attack. It was all he could do simply to evade each death blow, to minimize the impacts of that jagged edge, to turn the remaining fragments of his hauberk into the blade's inexorable path.

Spreading bruises, cracked bones, gaping gouges from which blood welled, soaking his wool gambon, he staggered under the unceasing assault.

It could not last.

It had already lasted beyond all reason.

Spinnock blocked yet another slash, but this time the sound his sword made was strangely dull, and the grip suddenly felt loose, the handle shorn from the tine – the pommel was gone. With a sobbing gasp, he ducked beneath a whistling blade and then pitched back—

But Kallor pressed forward, giving him no distance, and that two-handed sword lashed out yet again.

Spinnock's parry jolted his arm and his weapon seemed to blow apart in his hand, tined blade spinning into the air, the fragments of the grip a handful of shards falling from his numbed fingers.

The back-slash caught him across his chest.

He was thrown from his feet, landing hard on the slope of the ditch, where he sagged back, blood streaming down his front, and closed his eyes.

Kallor's rasping breaths drew closer.

Sweat dripped on to Spinnock's face, but still he did not open his eyes. He had felt it. A distant death. Yes, he had felt it, as he feared he might. So feared that he might. And, of all the deeds he had managed here at these crossroads, all that he had done up until this moment, not one could match the cost of the smile that now emerged on split, bleeding lips.

And this alone stayed Kallor's sword from its closing thrust. Stayed it . . . for a time.

'What,' Kallor asked softly, 'was the point, Spinnock Durav?'

But the fallen warrior did not answer.

'You could never win. You could never do anything but die here. Tell me, damn you, *what was the fucking point?'*

The question was a sob, the anguish so raw that Spinnock was startled into opening his eyes, into looking up at Kallor.

Behind the silhouette with its halo of tangled, sweat-matted hair, the heaving shoulders, he saw Great Ravens, a score or more, flying up from the south.

Closer and closer.

With an effort, Spinnock focused on Kallor once more. 'You don't understand,' he said. 'Not yet, Kallor, but you will. Someday, you will.'

*'He does not deserve you!'*

Spinnock frowned, blinked to clear his eyes. 'Oh, Kallor . . .'

The High King's face was ravaged with grief, and all that raged in the ancient man's eyes – well, none of it belonged. Not to the legend that was Kallor. Not to the nightmares roiling round and round his very name. Not to the lifeless sea of ashes in his wake. No, what Spinnock saw in Kallor's eyes were things that, he suspected, no one would ever see again.

It was, of sorts, a gift.

'Kallor,' he said, 'listen to me. Take this as you will, or not at all. I – I am sorry. That you are driven to this. And . . . and may you one day show your true self. May you, one day, be redeemed in the eyes of the world.'

Kallor cried out, as if struck, and he staggered back. He recovered with bared teeth. 'My true self? Oh, you damned fool! You see only what you want to see! In this last moment of your pathetic, useless life! May your soul rage for eternity in the heart of a star, Tiste Andii! May you yearn for what you can never have! For all infernal eternity!'

Spinnock had flinched back at the tirade. 'Do you now curse me, High King?' he asked in a whisper.

Kallor's face looked ready to shatter. He dragged a forearm across his eyes. 'No,' he said. 'Of course not. I will kill you clean. For what you have shown me this night – I have never before faced such a defence.' And then he paused, edging forward again, his eyes burning in their pits. 'You had chances, Spinnock Durav. To strike back. You could have wounded me – yes, you could have . . .'

'I was not here to do that, Kallor.'

The High King stared, and a glint of comprehension lit in his face. 'No,' he said. 'You only needed to delay me.'

Spinnock closed his eyes once more and settled his head back. 'For a time. You may never accept this, but it was for your own good. It's a mess over there. In that city. My Lord wanted you kept away.'

Kallor snarled. 'How generous in his mercy is your Lord.'

'Yes,' sighed Spinnock, 'he was ever that.'

Silence, then.

Not a sound. A dozen laboured heartbeats. Another dozen. Finally, some odd unease forced Spinnock to open his eyes yet again, to look upon Kallor.

Who stood, head bowed.

'Yes,' said Spinnock, in true sorrow, 'he is gone.'

Kallor did not lift his gaze. He did not move at all.

'And so,' continued Spinnock, 'I have stood here. In his stead. One last time.' He paused. 'And yes, it makes my death seem . . . easier—'

'Oh shut up, will you? I am thinking.'

'About what?'

Kallor met his eyes and bared his teeth. 'That bastard. *The bold, brazen bastard!'*

Spinnock studied the High King, and then he grunted.

'Well, that's it, then.'

'I don't ever want to see you again, Spinnock Durav. You are bleeding out. I will leave you to that. I hear it's quieter, easier – but then, what do I know?'

The Tiste Andii watched him set off then, up the road, to that fair city that even now bled with its own terrible wounds.

Too late to do anything, even if he'd wanted to. But, Spinnock Durav now suspected, Kallor might well have done nothing. He might have stood aside. 'High King,' he whispered, 'all you ever wanted was a throne. But trust me, you don't want Rake's. No, proud warrior, that one you would not want. I think, maybe, you just realized that.'

Of course, when it came to Kallor, there was no way to know.

The Great Ravens were descending now, thumping heavily on to the blood-splashed, muddy surface of the road.

And Spinnock Durav looked skyward then, as the dark forms of two dragons sailed past, barely a stone's throw above the ground.

Racing for Kallor.

He saw one of the dragons suddenly turn its head, eyes flashing back in his direction, and the creature pitched to one side, coming round.

A moment later the other dragon reached Kallor, catching him entirely unawares, talons lashing down to grasp the High King and lift him into the air. Wings thundering, the dragon carried its charge yet higher. Faint screams of fury sounded from the man writhing in that grasp.

Dragon and High King dipped behind a hill to the north.

One of the Great Ravens drew up almost at Spinnock's feet.

'Crone!' Spinnock coughed and spat blood. 'I'd have thought . . . Darujhistan . . .'

'Darujhistan, yes. I'd have liked to. To honour, to witness. To remember, and to weep. But our Lord . . . well, he had thoughts of you.' The head tilted. 'When we saw you, lying there, Kallor looming as he so likes to do, ah, we thought we were too late – we thought we had failed our Lord – and you. We thought – oh, never mind.'

The Great Raven was panting.

Spinnock knew that this was not exhaustion he was seeing in the ancient bird. *You can shed no tears, yet tears take you none the less. The extremity, the terrible distress.*

The dragon that had returned now landed on the grasses to the south of the track. Sembling, walking towards Spinnock and Crone and the haggle of Crone's kin.

Korlat.

Spinnock would have smiled up at her, but he had lost the strength for such things, and so he could only watch as she came up to him, using one

boot to shunt a squawking Crone to one side. She knelt and reached out a hand to brush Spinnock's spattered cheek. Her eyes were bleak. 'Brother . . .'

Crone croaked, 'Just heal him and be done with it – before he gasps out his last breath in front of us!'

She drew out a quaint flask. 'Endest Silann mixed this one. It should suffice.' She tugged loose the stopper and gently set the small bottle's mouth between Spinnock's lips, and then tilted it to drain the contents, and he felt that potent liquid slide down his throat. Sudden warmth flowed through him.

'Sufficient, anyway, to carry you home.' And she smiled.

'My last fight in his name,' said Spinnock Durav. 'I did as he asked, did I not?'

Her expression tightened, revealed something wan and ravaged. 'You have much to tell us, brother. So much that needs . . . explaining.'

Spinnock glanced at Crone.

The Great Raven ducked and hopped a few steps away. 'We like our secrets,' she cackled, 'when it's all we have!'

Korlat brushed his cheek again. 'How long?' she asked. 'How long did you hold him back?'

'Why,' he replied, 'I lit the torches . . . dusk was just past . . .'

Her eyes slowly widened. And she glanced to the east, where the sky had begun, at last, to lighten.

'Oh, Spinnock . . .'

A short time later, when she went to find his sword where it was lying in the grasses, Spinnock Durav said, 'No, Korlat. Leave it.'

She looked at him in surprise.

But he was not of a mind to explain.

Above the Gadrobi Hills, Kallor finally managed to drag free his sword, even as the dragon's massive head swung down, jaws wide. His thrust sank deep into the soft throat, just above the jutting avian collar bones. A shrill, spattering gasp erupted from the Soletaken, and all at once they were plunging earthward.

The impact was thunder and snapping bones. The High King was flung away, tumbling and skidding along dew-soaked grass. He gained his feet and spun to face the dragon.

It had sembled. Orfantal, on his face an expression of bemused surprise, was struggling to stand. One arm was broken. Blood gushed down from his neck. He seemed to have forgotten Kallor, as he turned in the direction of the road, and slowly walked away.

Kallor watched.

Orfantal managed a dozen steps before he fell to the ground.

It seemed this was a night for killing Tiste Andii.

His shoulders were on fire from the dragon's puncture wounds, which might well have proved fatal to most others, but Kallor was not like most others. Indeed, the High King was unique.

In his ferocity. In his stubborn will to live.

In the dry furnace heat of the hatred that ever swirled round him.

He set out once more for the city.

As dawn finally parted the night.

*Kallor.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

'There is no struggle too vast, no odds too overwhelming,
for even should we fail – should we fall
– we will know that we have lived.'

Anomander Rake
Son of Darkness

The continent-sized fragments of the shattered moon sent reflected sunlight down upon the world. The fabric of Night, closed so tight about the city of Black Coral, began at last to fray. The web that was this knotted manifestation of Kurald Galain withered under the assault. Shafts broke through and moonlight painted buildings, domes, towers, walls and the long-dead gardens they contained. Silvery glow seeped into the dark waters of the bay, sending creatures plunging to the inky blackness of the depths.

New world, young world. So unexpected, so premature, this rain of death.

Endest Silann could feel every breach as he knelt on the cold mosaic floor of the temple's Grand Vestry. He had once held the waters back from Moon's Spawn. He had once, long, long ago, guided his Lord to the fateful, final encounter with Mother Dark herself. He had clasped the hand of a dying High Priestess, sharing with her the bleak knowledge that nothing awaited her, nothing at all. He had stood, gods, so long ago now, staring down at his blood-covered hands, above the body of a sweet, gentle woman, Andarist's wife. While through the high window, the flames of dying Kharkanas flickered crimson and gold.

The Saelen Gara of the lost Kharkanan forestlands had believed that the moon was Father Light's sweet seduction, innocent maiden gift to Mother Dark. To remind her of his love, there in the sky of night. But then, they had also believed the moon was but the backside of Father Light's baleful eye, and could one rise up and wing the vast distance to that moon, they would discover that it was but a lens, and to look through was to see other worlds for whom the moon was not the moon at all, but the sun. The Saelen Gara talespinner would grin then, and make odd motions with his hands. 'Perspective,' he'd say. 'You see? The world changes according to where you stand. So choose, my children, choose and choose again, where you will make your stand . . .'

*Where you will make your stand. The world changes.*

*The world changes.*

Yes, he had held back the sea. He had made Moon's Spawn into a single held breath that had lasted months.

But now, ah, *now*, his Lord had asked him to hold back Light itself.

To save not a fortress, but a city. Not a single breath to hold, but the breath of Kurald Galain, an Elder Warren.

But he was old, and he did not know . . . he did not know . . .

Standing twenty paces away, in a niche of the wall, the High Priestess watched. Seeing him struggle, seeing him call upon whatever reserves he had left. Seeing him slowly, inexorably, fail.

And she could do nothing.

Light besieged Dark in the sky overhead. A god in love with dying besieged a child of redemption, and would use that child's innocence to usurp this weakened island of Kurald Galain – to claim for itself the very Throne of Darkness.

*For she has turned away.*

Against all this, a lone, ancient, broken warlock.

It was not fair.

Time was the enemy. But then, she told herself with wry bitterness, time was always the enemy.

Endest Silann could not drive back every breach. She had begun to feel the damage being wrought upon Night, upon the Tiste Andii in this city. It arrived like a sickness, a failing of internal balances. She was weakening.

*We are all weakening.*

An old, broken man. He was not enough, and they had all known – everyone except the one who mattered the most. *Lord Rake, your faith blinded you. See him, kneeling there – there, my Lord, is your fatal error in judgement.*

*And without him – without the power here and now to keep everything away – without that, your grand design will collapse into ruin.*

*Taking us with it.*

*By the Abyss, taking us all.*

It seemed so obvious now. To stand in Rake's presence was to feel a vast, unassailable confidence. That he could gauge all things with such precision as to leave one in awe, in disbelief and in wonder.

The plans of the Son of Darkness never went awry. Hold to faith in him, and all shall settle into place.

*But how many plans worked out precisely* because *of our faith in him? How many times did we – did people like Endest Silann and Spinnock Durav – do things beyond their capability, simply to ensure that Rake's vision would prove true? And how many times can he ask that of them, of us?*

Anomander Rake wasn't here.

No, he was *gone.*

For ever gone.

Where then was that solid core of confidence, which they might now grasp tight? In desperation, in pathetic need?

*You should never have left this to us. To him.*

The sickness in her soul was spreading. And when she succumbed, the last bulwark protecting every Tiste Andii in Black Coral would give way.

And they would all die. For they were the flesh of Kurald Galain.

*Our enemies feed on flesh.*

*Lord Anomander Rake, you have abandoned us.*

She stood in the niche as if it was a sarcophagus. Fevered, watching Endest Silann slowly crumple there in the centre of that proud, diffident mosaic spanning the floor.

*You failed us.*

*And now we fail you.*

With a gasp of agony, Apsal'ara lunged backward along the beam. The skin of her hands and forearms had blackened. She kicked in desperate need, pushing herself still farther from that swirling vortex of darkness. Sliding on her back, over the grease of sweat, bile and blood. Steam rose from her arms. Her fingers were twisted like roots—

The pain was so vast it was almost exquisite. She writhed, twisted in its grip, and then pitched down from the beam. Chains rapped against the sodden wood. Her weight pulled them down in a rattle and she heard something *break.*

Thumping on to ash-smeared clay.

Staring as she held up her hands. Seeing frost-rimed shackles, and, beneath them, broken links.

She had felt the wagon rocking its way back round. Horror and disbelief had filled her soul, and the need to do something had overwhelmed her, trampling all caution, trampling sanity itself.

And now, lying on the cold, gritty mud, she thought to laugh.

Free.

Free with nowhere to run. With possibly dead hands – and what good was a thief with dead, rotting hands? She struggled to uncurl her fingers. Watched the knuckles crack open like charred meat. Red fissures gaped. And, as she stared, she saw the first droplets of blood welling from them. Was that a good sign?

'Fire is life,' she intoned. 'Stone is flesh. Water is breath. Fire is life. Stone is water is flesh is breath is life. Pluck a flower from a field and it will not thrive. Take and beauty dies, and that which one possesses becomes worthless. I am a thief. I take but do not keep. All I gain I cast away. I take your wealth only because you value it.

'I am Apsal'ara, Mistress of Thieves. Only you need fear me, you who lust to own.'

She watched her fingers slowly straighten, watched flakes of skin lift and then fall away.

She would survive this. Her hands had touched Darkness, and lived still.

As if it mattered.

Even here, beneath the wagon, the dread sounds of war surrounded her. Chaos closed in on all sides. Souls died in numbers beyond counting, and their cries revealed a loss so far past comprehension that she refused to contemplate it. The death of honourable souls. The immense sacrifice wasted. No, none of this bore thinking about.

Apsal'ara rolled on to her side, and then on to her knees and elbows.

She began crawling.

And then gasped anew, as a familiar voice filled her head.

*'Mistress of Thieves. Take the eye. The eye of the god. Apsal'ara, steal the eye . . .'*

Trembling – wondering – how? How could he reach so into her mind? He could do so only if . . . only if—

Apsal'ara gasped a third time.

And so . . . once in pain, once in wonder, and once in . . . *in hope.*

She resumed crawling.

*Pluck your flower. I am coming for you.*

*Oh yes, I am coming for you.*

With each soul consumed, the power of chaos grew. Hunger surged with renewed strength, and the beleaguered defenders fell back another step.

But they were running out of steps.

The indomitable legions surrounded the now stationary wagon and its dwindling ring of souls. The countless dead who had answered Hood's final summons were melting away, most of them too ancient to call upon

memories of strength, to even remember that will alone held power. In standing against the enemy, they had done little more than marginally slow the advance of chaos, as all that remained of them was ripped apart, devoured.

Some, however, were made of sterner things. The Grey Swords, delivered unto Hood by the loss of Fener, fought with grim ferocity. Commanding them, Brukhalian was like a deep-rooted standing stone, as if capable of willing himself immovable, unconquerable. He had, after all, done this before. The company fought and held for a time – an impressive length of time – but now their flanks were under assault, and there was nothing to do but retreat yet closer to the enormous wagon with its heap of bodies.

A score of Seguleh, all that remained of the Second's forces, formed one impossibly thin link with the Grey Swords. Each one had fallen to Anomander Rake, and this knowledge alone was sufficient, for it burned like acid, it stung like shame. They wore their masks, and as they fought, the painted slashes, the sigils of rank, began to fade, worn away by the fires of chaos, until upon each warrior the mask gleamed pure. As if here, within the world of this sword, some power could yield to greater truths. *Here*, Dragnipur seemed to say, *you are all equal.*

The Grey Swords' other flank closed up with another knot of soldiers – the Bridgeburners, into which remnants of other Malazan forces were falling, drawing upon the élite company's ascendant power, and upon the commander now known as Iskar Jarak.

The Bridgeburners were arrayed in a half-circle that slowly contracted under the brunt of the assault. Grey Swords on one flank, and the last of the Chained on the other, where a huge demon formed the point of a defiant wedge that refused to buckle. Tears streamed down the demon's face, for even as it fought, it grieved for those lost. And such grief filled Pearl's heart unto bursting. Pearl did not fight for itself, nor for the wagon, nor even the Gate of Darkness, the Wandering Hold. The demon fought for its comrades, as would a soldier pushed beyond breaking, pushed until there was nowhere else to go.

In the ash-swarmed sky above, chained dragons, Loqui Wyval and Enkarala tore swaths through the tumbling, descending storm clouds. Lightning lashed out to enwreath them, slowly tearing them to pieces. Still they fought on. The Enkarala would not relent for they were mindless in their rage. The Loqui Wyval found strength in hearts greater than their modest proportions – no, they were not dragons; they were lesser kin – but they knew the power of mockery, of disdain. For the Enkarala, chaos itself was a contemptible thing. The dragons, many of whom had been chained since the time of Draconus, were indifferent to the Gate, to all the other squalid victims of this dread sword. They did not fight on behalf of any noble cause. No, each one fought alone, for itself, and they knew that survival had nothing to do with nobility. No alliance was weighed, no thought of fighting in concert brushed the incandescent minds of these creatures. Nothing in their nature was designed to accommodate aught but singular battle. A strength and a curse, but in these fiery, deadly clouds, that strength was failing, and the very nature of the dragons was now destroying them.

The battle raged. Annihilation was a deafening scream that drove all else from the minds of the defenders. They made their will into weapons, and with these weapons they slashed through the misshapen, argent foe, only to find yet more rising before them, howling, laughing, swords thundering on shields.

Toc had no idea where this damned horse had come from, but clearly some breathtaking will fired its soul. In its life it had not been bred for war, and yet it fought like a beast twice its weight. Kicking, stamping, jaws snapping. A Wickan breed – he was fairly certain of that – a creature of appalling endurance, it carried him into the fray again and again, and he had begun to suspect that he would fail before the horse did.

Humbling – no, *infuriating.*

He struggled to control it as he sought to lunge once more into that wall of chaotic rage. Getting to be a miserable habit, all this dying and dying again. Of course, this would be the final time, and a better man than he would find some consolation in that. A better man, aye.

Instead, he railed. He spat into the eye of injustice, and he fought on, even as his one eyeless socket itched damnably, until it seemed to be sizzling as if eating its way into his brain.

He lost his grip on the reins, and almost pitched from the saddle as the horse galloped away from the front line of the Bridgeburners. He loosed a stream of curses – he wanted to die at their sides, he needed to – no, he was not one of them, he could not match their power, their ascendant ferocity – he had seen Trotts there, and Detoran. And so many others, and there was Iskar Jarak himself, although why Whiskeyjack had come to prefer some Seven Cities name – in place of his real one – made no sense to Toc. Not that he was of any stature to actually ask the man – gods, even had he been, he couldn't have got close, so tightly were the Bridgeburners arrayed around the soldier.

And now the stupid horse was taking him farther and farther away.

He saw, ahead, the Lord of Death. Standing motionless, as if contemplating guests at a damned picnic. The horse carried Toc straight for the hoary bastard, who slowly turned at the very last moment, as the horse skidded to a halt in a spray of ashes and mud.

Hood glanced down at the spatter on its frayed robes.

'Don't look at me!' Toc snarled as he collected up the reins once more. 'I was trying to get the beast going the other way!'

'You are my Herald, Toc the Younger, and I have need of you.'

'To do what, announce your impending nuptials? Where is the skeletal hag, anyway?'

'You have a message to deliver—'

'Deliver where? How? In case you haven't noticed, we're in a little trouble here, Hood. Gods, my eye – agh, I mean, the missing one – it's driving me mad!'

'Yes, your missing eye. About that—'

At that instant, Toc's horse reared in sudden terror, as a churning cloud lunged down like an enormous fist, engulfing a dying dragon directly overhead.

Swearing, his voice rising in fear, Toc fought to regain control of the beast as cloud and dragon tumbled to one side – the dragon pulled down to the thrashing legions, which closed in and swarmed it. In moments the dragon was gone.

The horse skittered and then settled—

Only to bolt once more, as in a burst of cold, bitter air, something else arrived.

What good could ever come of acceding to the suggestions of a corpse? This was the sort of question Glanno Tarp was good at asking, only he'd forgotten this time and it was funny how blind gibbering terror could do that. Warrens and warrens and portals and Gates and places nobody in their right minds might want to visit no matter how special the scenery – and no, dammit, he didn't know where they'd just ended up, but he could tell – oh yes, he could tell all right – that it wasn't a nice place.

Horses shrilling (but then, they always did that when arriving), carriage slapping down on to gritty mud in a chorus of outraged creaks, splinters and calamcophony, slewing this way and that – and the sky was coming down in giant balls of mercury and there were dragons up there and wyval and Hood knew what else—

Chains sawing back and forth, to the sides and straight up, all emerging from the ghastliest wagon Glanno had ever seen – loaded with more bodies than seemed reasonable, much less possible.

So of course he froze up all the brakes – what else was he supposed to do? And then bodies were flying past. Sweetest Sufferance, curled up into a soft flouncy bouncy ball that landed bouncily and rolled and rolled. That snarling hulk Gruntle, twisting in the air so that he could land on all fours – *meow* – and Faint, far less elegant for all her bountiferous beauty, going splat on her face all spreadeagled, silly girl. Amby and Jula flew past embraced like lovers, at least until the ground showed up and got between

them. Reccanto Ilk fetched up beside Glanno, cracking the backrest of the bench.

'You idiot! We ain't tied ourselves! It was just dark and dark and nothing else and now you just go and drop us into—'

'Wasn't me, you clumsy pig!'

This argument didn't survive the fullest comprehension of their surroundings.

Reccanto Ilk slowly sat up. 'Holy shit.'

Glanno leapt to his feet. 'Cartographer!' But he'd forgotten about his splints. Yelping, he tottered, and then pitched forward on to the backs of the first two horses. They deftly stepped to either side so that he could fall a little more before getting tangled in all the crap down there, whereupon the horses eagerly moved back in an effort to crush him into the kind of pulp that could never again whip the reins.

Reccanto scrabbled to drag him back on to the bench. The splint bindings helped, although Glanno did plenty of shrieking in pain – at least he wasn't being crushed. Moments later he fetched up again on the splintered bench.

A wretched dead-looking Jaghut was walking up to Cartographer, who, lashed to a wheel, had come to rest with his head down, eyeing the Jaghut's muddy boots. 'I had begun to wonder,' the Jaghut said, 'if you had become lost.'

Pushing Reccanto aside, Glanno worked his way round to witness this fateful meeting – oh yes, that had to be Hood himself. Why, a damned family reunionebration!

Cartographer's upside-down smile seemed to send a nearby rider's horse into yet another panic, and the soldier swore impressively as he fought to quell the beast. 'My Lord,' Cartographer was saying, 'we both know, surely, that what goes around comes around.' And then he struggled feebly at his bindings. 'And around,' he added despondently.

Gruntle, who had staggered up to join them, now growled deep in his chest and then went to the carriage door, thumping it with a fist. 'Master Quell!'

Hood turned to the warrior. 'That will not be necessary, Treach-spawn. My sole requirement was that you arrive here. Now, you need only leave once more. Cartographer will guide you.'

Sweetest Sufferance was dragging a dazed Faint back up on to the carriage, displaying surprising strength, although the effort made her eyes bulge alarmingly. Glanno nudged Reccanto and nodded towards Sweetest. 'That face remind you of anything?'

Reccanto squinted, and then sniggered.

'You're both dead,' she hissed.

Amby and Jula bobbed into view to either side of her, grinning through smears of mud.

*

Inside the carriage, Mappo started to open the door but Quell snapped out a shaky hand to stay him. 'Gods, don't do that!'

Precious Thimble had curled up on the floor at their feet, rocking and moaning.

'What awaits us outside?' the Trell asked.

Quell shook his head. He was bone white, face glistening with sweat. 'I should've guessed. The way that map on the road narrowed at the far end. Oh, we've been used! Duped! Gods, I think I'm going to be sick—'

'Damned Trygalle,' muttered Toc. More confused than he had ever been by this sudden, inexplicable arrival. How did they manage to arrive *here*? And then he saw Gruntle. 'Gods below, it's you!'

Someone was being loudly sick inside the carriage.

Gruntle stared up at Toc, and then frowned.

*Ah, I guess I don't look like Anaster any more.* 'We shared—'

'Herald,' said Hood. 'It is time.'

Toc scowled, and then scratched at his eye socket. 'What? You're sending me with them?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'Then I'm to rejoin the living?'

'Alas, no, Toc the Younger. You are dead and dead you will remain. But this shall mark your final task as my Herald. Another god claims you.'

Toc prepared to dismount but the Lord of Death lifted a hand. 'Ride in the carriage's wake, *close* in its wake. For a time. Now, Herald, listen well to my last message. The blood is needed. The blood is needed . . .'

Gruntle had stopped listening. Even the vague disquiet he'd felt when that one-eyed rider had accosted him was fast vanishing beneath a flood of battle lust. He stared out at the enemy, watched the defenders wither away.

A war that could not be won by such sorry souls – a war that begged for a champion, one who would stand until the very end.

Another growl rumbled from him, and he stepped away from the carriage, reaching for his cutlasses.

'Whoa there, y'damned manx!'

The bark startled him and he glared up at Glanno Tarp, who smiled a hard smile. 'Shareholders can't just walk away – we'd have to plug ya fulla arrows. Get back aboard, stripy, we're leaving all over again!'

There could be but one outcome, and Draconus had known that all along. He had sensed nothing of the Trygalle's arrival, nor even its departure, with Toc riding in its wake. Whatever occurred behind him could not reach through to awaken his senses.

One outcome.

After all, Dragnipur had never offered salvation. Iron forged to bind, a hundred thousand chains hammered into the blade, layers upon layers entwined, folded, wrapped like rope. Draconus, surrounded in the molten fires of Burn's heart, drawing forth chains of every metal that existed, drawing them out link by glowing link. Twisted ropes of metal on the anvil, and down came the hammer. The *one* hammer, the only tool that could forge such a weapon – and he remembered its vast weight, the scalding grip that lacerated his alien hand.

Even in her dreaming, Burn had been most displeased.

Chains upon chains. Chains to bind. Bind Darkness itself, transforming the ancient forest through which it had wandered, twisting that blackwood into a wagon, into huge, tottering wheels, into a bed that formed a horizontal door – like the entrance to a barrow – above the portal. Blackwood, to hold and contain the soul of Kurald Galain.

He remembered. Sparks in countless hues skipping away like shattered rainbows. The deafening ringing of the hammer and the way the anvil trembled to every blow. The waves of heat flashing against his face. The bitter taste of raw ore, the stench of sulphur. *Chains! Chains and chains, pounded down into glowing impressions upon the blade, quenched and honed and into Burn's white heart and then – it begins again. And again.*

*Chains! Chains to bind!*

*Bind the Fallen!*

And now, unbelievably, impossibly, Draconus had felt that first splintering. Chains had broken.

*So it ends. I did not think, I did not imagine—*

He had witnessed his Bound companions falling away, failing. He had seen the chaos descend upon each one, eating through flesh with actinic zeal, until shackles fell to the ground – until the iron bands held nothing. *Nothing left.*

*I never meant – I never wanted such an end – to any of you, of us.*

*No, I was far too cruel to ever imagine an end. An escape.*

*Yet now, witness these thoughts of mine. Now, I would see you all live on, yes, in these chains, but not out of cruelty. Ah, no, not that. Abyss take me, I would see you live out of mercy.*

Perhaps he wept now. Or these scalding tears announced the crushing end of hysterical laughter. No matter. They were all being eaten alive. *We are all being eaten alive.*

And Dragnipur had begun to come apart.

When the chaos disintegrated the wagon, destroyed the door, and took hold of the Gate, the sword would shatter and chaos would be freed of this oh-so-clever trap, and Draconus's brilliant lure – his eternal snare eternally leading chaos on *and away from everything else* – would have failed. He could not contemplate what would happen then, to the countless succession of realms and worlds, and of course he would not be there to witness the aftermath in any case. But he knew that, in his last thoughts, he would feel nothing but unbearable guilt.

*So, chaos, at least unto one victim, what you deliver is indeed mercy.*

He had begun walking forward, to join the other Bound, to stand, perhaps, at Pearl's side, until the end came.

The echo of that snapping chain haunted him. *Someone's broken loose. How?* Even the Hounds of Shadow could only slip free by plunging into Kurald Galain's black heart. Their chains did not break. Dragnipur's essential integrity had not been damaged.

*But now . . . someone's broken loose.*

*How?*

Chains and chains and chains to bind—

A bony hand closed on his shoulder and dragged him back.

Snarling, Draconus half turned. 'Let go, damn you! I will stand with them, Hood – I must, can't you see that?'

The Lord of Death's hand tightened, the nails biting, and Hood slowly pulled him closer. 'The fray,' the god said in a rasp, 'is not for you.'

'You are not my master—'

'Stand with me, Draconus. It's not yet time.'

'For what?' He struggled to tear free, but a Jaghut's strength could be immense, and barring the bloody removal of his entire shoulder, Draconus could do nothing. He and the Lord of Death stood alone, not twenty paces from the motionless wagon.

'Consider this,' said Hood, 'a request for forgiveness.'

Draconus stared. 'What? Who asks my forgiveness?'

Hood, Lord of the Dead, should have been the last to fall to Dragnipur. Whatever the Son of Darkness intended, its final play was found in the slaying of this ancient god. Such was the conviction of Draconus. A mad, pointless gamble, the empty purchase of time already consumed, the wasting of countless souls, an entire realm of the dead.

As it turned out, Draconus was wrong.

There was one more. One more.

Arriving with the power of a mountain torn apart in a long, deafening, crushing detonation. Argent clouds were shredded, whipped away in dark winds. The legions pressing on all sides recoiled, and the thousand closing paces so viciously won were lost in an instant. Dragons screamed. Voices erupted as if dragged out from throats – the pressure, the pain, the stunning power—

Chaos flinched, and then, slowly, began to gather itself once more.

No single force could defeat this enemy. Destruction was its own law, and even as it devoured itself it would devour everything else. Chaos, riding the road of Darkness, ever to arrive unseen, from sources unexpected, from places where one never thought to look, much less guard against.

The sword and all within it was dying, now, at last; dying.

Hood's hand had left his shoulder, and Draconus sagged down on to his knees.

One more.

And, yes, he knew who was now among them.

Should he laugh? Should he seek him out, mock him? Should he close hands about his throat so that they could lock one to the other until the descent of oblivion?

No, he would do none of this.

*Who asks for my forgiveness?*

Had he the strength, he would have cried out.

*Anomander Rake, you need not ask. That begging, alas, must come from me.*

*This was Mother Dark I snared here. Your mother—*

*And so, what will you now do?*

A heartbeat later, a faint gasp escaped Draconus, and he lifted his head, opened his eyes once more. 'Rake?' he whispered.

Draconus slowly rose. And turned. To face the wagon.

*To witness.*

The Second watched yet another Seguleh fall. He then dragged his horse round, to glare with dead eyes at a tall, ornate carriage, as its train of screaming horses lunged forward. Figures pitched to one side, holding on for dear life as a fissure tore open – into which those horses vanished.

Hood's Herald – that one-eyed soldier – drove heels to his tattered mount, following.

And the Lord of Death's voice drifted through the Second. *'It seems you are needed after all, as you suspected. Now go – and know this, old friend, you have served me well.*

*'I am the god of death no longer.*

*'When you have done this last thing, your service is at an end. And then, well, Skinner awaits . . .'*

The Second tilted back his masked, helmed head and howled in glee. Sheathing his swords, he rode hard after the carriage.

He saw the Herald vanish.

And the fissure began to close.

The Second drove his long-dead Jaghut stallion into that dying portal—

And left the realm of Dragnipur. The other Seguleh were doomed anyway, and though in this last battle they had each redeemed something of their shame in dying to a foreigner, that was no reason to fall at their sides.

The Second did not stay long in the wake of the others as they thundered through unknown warrens, no, not long at all. For he had been summoned. Summoned, yes, by a weapon in need—

Riding a seething storm of fiery winds, plunging through, his horse's sheaves of armour clattering, its hoofs ringing sharp on cobbles, the Second saw what he sought, and he swept his hand down—

'I'll take that,' laughed a hollow, metallic voice. And the lance was torn from Cutter's hand. In an array of flapping tatters of hide, frayed straps and mangled buckles, the undead Seguleh who had, long ago, once given him the weapon, now readied the lance, even as the masked warrior charged straight towards the white Hounds.

*'Skinner!'* he roared. *'I'm coming for you! But first, these guys . . .'*

Karsa Orlong sidestepped at the sudden arrival of some armoured warrior riding a monstrous, dead horse. Seeing the newcomer ride to meet the Hounds, he snarled and set off after him.

The lance angled down on the left side and so the Toblakai went to the rider's right, eyes fixing on a Hound that clearly intended an attack on the horseman's unprotected side.

Two beasts and two warriors all met at once.

The rider's lance drove into a Hound's throat just beneath the jaw, surging upward through the base of the skull, severing the spinal cord on its way to obliterate the back of the animal's brain. The serrated lance head erupted from the skull in an explosion of grey pulp, blood and bone shards.

Karsa swung down, two-handed, as the other Hound arrived alongside the rider and reared to close jaws on the stranger's right thigh. Flint blade sliced down through the spine, chopping halfway through a neck thick as a horse's, before jamming – the Hound's forward momentum, now pitching downward, dragged the weapon and Karsa with it as the animal slammed the cobbles.

At that instant the rider's Jaghut horse collided chest to chest with a third hound. Bones shattered. The impact sent the rider over his horse's head, dragging his lance free as he went. He struck and rolled off the back of the Hound – which seemed stunned, as the undead horse stumbled back.

Pulled down on to his knees, Karsa ducked the snapping attack of another Hound – and then the beast was past, as were all the others. The Toblakai rose, took two quick strides and thrust his sword into the chest of the dazed third Hound. Howling in pain, it staggered away from Karsa's blade, blood fountaining out in the path of the withdrawing sword. The stranger had recovered and he now sank the lance into the gut of the writhing animal, the lance head tearing messily through soft tissue, fluids spilling down.

Something flashed in the eye-holes of the twin-scarred mask. 'Well done, Toblakai! Now let's chase down the others!'

The two warriors swung round.

Cutter stared as seven Hounds swept round Karsa and the Seguleh. Now he didn't even hold a lance – *dammit* – and he unsheathed a pair of knives as one of the beasts made straight for him.

A hand grasped the back of his shirt and yanked him back. Yelling in alarm, Cutter stumbled into someone's short, brawny arms. He caught a

momentary glimpse of a weathered face, eyes bulging, red moustache twitching beneath a bulbous nose—

*Do I know this man?*

And the one who had thrown him clear now lumbered forward, lifting an enormous two-handed axe. Barathol—

'Wrong place for us!' growled the man holding Cutter, and they began backing up.

Barathol recognized this beast – the one Chaur had tangled with, the one that had broken his friend's skull. He almost sang his joy as he launched himself into its path, axe sweeping in a savage diagonal arc, low to high, as the Hound arrived, snarling, monstrous—

The axe edge bit deep into the beast's lower jaw – another single instant's delay and he would have caught its neck. As it was, the blow hammered the Hound's head to one side.

The beast's chest struck Barathol.

As if he'd been standing in the path of a bronze-sheathed battering ram, he was flung back, cartwheeling through the air, and was unconscious before he landed, fifteen paces behind the body of Anomander Rake.

The Hound had skidded, stumbled, wagging its head – its right mandible was broken, a row of jagged molars jutting out almost horizontal, blood splashing down.

For this battle, the beast was finished.

In the moment that Karsa and the stranger whirled round, a shadow swept over them, and both flinched down in the midst of a sudden wind, reeking of rot, gusting past—

Tips of its wings clattering along the facings of buildings to either side, a dragon sailed above the street, talons striking like vipers. Each one closing round a Hound in a crushing, puncturing embrace, lifting the screaming animals into the air. The dragon's head snapped down, jaws engulfing another—

And then the dragon thundered its wings and lifted skyward once more, carrying away three Hounds.

The creature's attack had lasted but a handful of heartbeats, in the moment that Cutter was dragged back into Antsy's arms – the Falari half carrying him in his charge towards the door of the shopfront to the right – and Barathol, his gaze fixed solely upon the hated Hound attacking him, swung his axe.

These three did not even see the dragon.

Samar Dev stared wide-eyed at the dragon as it heaved back into the sky with its three howling, snarling victims.

She was crouched over the motionless form of Traveller, Dassem Ultor, wielder of Vengeance, slayer of the Son of Darkness, who now lifted a sorrow-wracked visage, bleak, broken – and then reached out and grasped her, tugged her close.

*'Not my choice! Do not blame me, woman! Do you hear? Do not!'*

Then his eyes widened and he dragged her down on to the cobbles, covered her with his own body.

As two behemoths collided not three paces distant.

A white Hound.

And a bear, a god, a beast forgotten in the passing of the world.

It had arrived a moment after the Hound, and its massive forearms wrapped round in a crushing embrace, lifting the Hound into the air – and clear of Samar Dev and Dassem – before both creatures slammed into and through the building's front wall.

Rubble crashed down, tumbling chunks of masonry striking Dassem's broad back as he pulled himself and Samar away from the collapsing façade. Somewhere within that building, bear and Hound fought in a frenzy.

Leaving, now, two Hounds of Light, unopposed, and they reached the corpse of Anomander Rake. Jaws closed about a thigh and his body was

dragged upward. The second beast circled, as if contemplating its own bite – but the sword still lodged in the Tiste Andii's skull was pitching about as the first animal sought to carry away its prize, and wise caution kept it back.

The Seguleh threw his lance from fifteen paces away. The weapon sank into the side of the circling Hound, knocking it down – to be up again in an instant, snarling and snapping at the jutting shaft.

Karsa, whose longer strides had sent him ahead of the Second, voiced a Teblor battle cry – an ancient one, heard only when the elders spun their tales of ancient heroes – and the Hound gripping Rake's corpse flinched at the sound.

Releasing its hold on that torn, gashed leg, it lunged towards the attacking Toblakai.

Two javelins struck the animal from its left. Neither lodged, but it was enough to sting its attention, and the Hound's head pitched round to confront the new attackers.

Two young Teblor women stood on the other side of the avenue, each calmly readying another javelin in her atlatl. Between them stood a large, mangy dog, tensed, fangs bared, its growl so low it might as well have been coming up from the earth below.

The Hound hesitated.

Karsa charged towards it, blade whistling through the air—

The beast broke and ran – and the Toblakai's sword sliced off its stubby tail and nothing else.

The Hound howled.

Shifting round, Karsa advanced on the other animal – it had dragged the lance loose and now it too was fleeing, leaving a trail of blood.

The Seguleh reclaimed his gore-smeared weapon.

Karsa hesitated, and then he moved to stand over the body of Anomander Rake. 'They are beaten,' he said.

The masked face swung round. Dead eyes in rimmed slits regarded him. 'It has been a long time since I last heard that war cry, Toblakai. Pray,' the warrior added, 'I never hear it again!'

Karsa's attention, however, was drawn to the Teblor women, and the dog that now advanced, its own stubbed tail wagging.

Staring at the animal, watching its limping approach, Karsa Orlong struggled against a sob. He had sent this dog home. Half dead, fevered and weak from blood loss, it had set out – so long ago now, so long ago. He looked up at the Teblor girls, neither of whom spoke. It was difficult to see through the tears – did he know these two? No, they looked too young.

They looked . . .

Down the side street, the five Hounds of Shadow had been driven back, unable to hold their ground against the combined sorceries of Spite and Envy. The magic slashed their hides. Blood sprayed from their snouts. And on all sides, forces sought to crush them down, destroy them utterly.

Writhing, battered, they fell back, step by step.

And the Daughters of Draconus drew ever closer to their prize.

Their father's sword.

A birthright long denied them. Of course, both Envy and Spite understood the value of patience. Patience, yes, in the fruition of their desires, their needs.

The Hounds could not match them, not in power, nor in savage will.

The long wait was almost over.

The sisters barely registered the quiet arrival of a carriage well behind the Hounds. Alas, the same could not be said for the one who stepped out from it and swung strangely bestial eyes towards them.

That steady, deadly regard reached through indeed.

They halted their advance. Sorceries died away. The Hounds, shedding blood that steamed in the dawn's light, limped back in the direction of the

fallen wielder of Dragnipur.

Envy and Spite hesitated. Desires were stuffed screaming back into their tiny lockboxes. Plans hastily, bitterly readjusted. Patience . . . ah, patience, yes, awakened once more.

*Oh well, maybe next time.*

The vicious battle within the shell of the mostly demolished building had ended. Heart fluttering with fear, Samar Dev cautiously approached. She worked her way over the rubble and splintered crossbeams, edged past an inner wall that had remained mostly intact, and looked then upon the two motionless leviathans.

A faint cry rose from her. Awkwardly, she made her way closer, and a moment later found herself half sitting, half slumped against a fragmented slab of plastered wall, staring down at the dying bear's torn and shredded head.

The Hound was gasping as well, its back end buried beneath the giant bear, red foam bubbling from its nostrils, each breath shallower and wetter than the one before, until finally, with a single, barely audible sigh, it died.

Samar Dev's attention returned to the god that had so haunted her, ever looming, ever testing the air . . . seeking . . . what? *'What?'* she asked it now in a hoarse whisper.

'What did you want?'

The beast's one remaining eye seemed to shift slightly inside its ring of red. In it, she saw only pain. And loss.

The witch drew out her knife. Was this the thing to do? Should she not simply let it go? Let it leave this unjust, heartless existence? The last of its kind. Forgotten by all . . .

*Well, I will not forget you, my friend.*

She reached down with the knife, and slipped the blade into the pool of blood beneath the bear's head. And she whispered words of binding,

repeating them over and over again, until at last the light of life departed the god's eye.

Clutching two Hounds with a third one writhing in his mouth, Tulas Shorn could do little more than shake the beasts half senseless as the dragon climbed ever higher above the mountains north of Lake Azure. Of course, he could do one more thing. He could drop them from a great height.

Which he did. With immense satisfaction.

*'Wait! Wait! Stop it! Stop!'*

Iskaral Pust climbed free of the ruckus – the mound of thrashing, snarling, spitting and grunting bhokarala, the mass of tangled, torn hair and filthy robes and prickly toes that was his wife, and he glared round.

'You idiots! He isn't even here any more! Gah, it's too late! Gah! That odious, slimy, putrid lump of red-vested dung! No, get that away from me, ape.' He leapt to his feet. His mule stood alone. 'What good are you?' he accused the beast, raising a fist.

Mogora climbed upright, adjusting her clothes. She then stuck out her tongue, which seemed to be made entirely of spiders.

Seeing this, Iskaral Pust gagged. 'Gods! No wonder you can do what you do!'

She cackled. 'And oh how you beg for more!'

'Aagh! If I'd known, I'd have begged for something else!'

'Oh, what would you have begged for, sweetie?'

'A knife, so I could cut my own throat. Look at me. I'm covered in bites!'

'They got sharp teeth, all right, them bhokarala—'

'Not them, month-old cream puff. These are spider bites!'

'You deserve even worse! Did you drug her senseless? There's no other way she'd agree to—'

'Power! I have power! It's irresistible, everybody knows that! A man can look like a slug! His hair can stick out like a bhederin's tongue! He can be knee-high and perfectly proportioned – he can stink, he can eat his own earwax, none of it matters! If he has *power*!'

'Well, that's what's wrong with the world, then. It's why ugly people don't just die out.' And then she smiled. 'It's why you and me, we're made for each other! Let's have babies, hundreds of babies!'

Iskaral Pust ran to his mule, scrabbled aboard, and fled for his life.

The mule walked, seemingly unmindful of the rider thrashing and kicking about on its back, and at a leisurely saunter, Mogora kept pace.

The bhokarala, which had been cooing and grooming in a reconciliatory love fest, now flapped up into the air, circling over their god's head like gnats round the sweetest heap of dung ever beheld.

Approaching thunder startled Picker from her reverie within the strange cave, and she stared upon the carved rock wall, eyes widening to see the image of the carriage blurring as if in motion.

If the monstrosity was indeed pounding straight for her, moments from exploding into the cavern, then she would be trampled, for there was nowhere to go in the hope of evading those rearing horses and the pitching carriage behind them.

An absurd way for her soul to die—

The apparition arrived in a storm of infernal wind, yet it emerged from the wall ghostly, almost transparent, and she felt the beasts and the conveyance tear through her – a momentary glimpse of a manic driver, eyes wide and staring, both legs jutting out straight and splayed and apparently splinted. And still others, on the carriage roof and tossing about on the ends of straps from the sides, expressions stunned and jolted. All of this, sweeping through her, and past—

And a rider lunged into view directly before her, sawing the reins – and this man and his mount were real, solid. Sparks spat out from skidding hoofs, the horse's eyeless head lifting. Picker staggered back in alarm.

Damned corpses! She stared up at the rider, and then swore. 'I know you!'

The one-eyed man, enwreathed in the stench of death, settled his horse and looked down upon her. And then he said, 'I am Hood's Herald now, Corporal Picker.'

'Oh. Is that a promotion?'

'No, a damned sentence, and you're not the only one I need to visit, so enough of the sardonic shit and listen to me—'

She bridled. 'Why? What am I doing here? What's Hood want with me that he ain't already got? Hey, take a message back to him! I want to—'

'I cannot, Picker. Hood is dead.'

'He's *what*?'

'The Lord of Death no longer exists. Gone. For ever more. Listen, I ride to the gods of war. Do you understand, torc-bearer? *I ride to all the gods of war.'*

Torc-bearer? She sagged. 'Ah, shit.'

Toc the Younger spoke then, and told her all she needed to know.

When he was done, she stared, the blood drained from her face, and watched as he gathered the reins once more and prepared to leave.

'Wait!' she demanded. 'I need to get out of here! How do I do that, Toc?'

The dead eye fixed upon her one last time. He pointed at the gourds resting on the stone floor to either side of Picker. 'Drink. Live up to your name. Pick one, Picker.'

'Are you mad? You just told me where that blood's come from!'

'Drink, and remember all that I have told you.'

And then he was gone.

Remember, yes, she would do that. *'Find the Toblakai. Find the killer and remind him . . . remind him, do you understand me? Then, torc-bearer, lead*

*him to war.*

*'Lead him to war . . .'*

There had been more, much more. None of it anything she could hope to forget. 'All I wanted to do was retire.'

Cursing under her breath, she walked over to the nearest gourd, crouched down before it. *Drink. It's blood, dammit!*

*Drink.*

To stand in the heart of Dragnipur, to stand above the very Gate of Darkness, this was, for Anomander Rake, a most final act. Perhaps it was desperation. Or a sacrifice beyond all mortal measure.

A weapon named Vengeance, or a weapon named Grief – either way, where he had been delivered by that sword was a world of his own making. And all the choices that might have been were as dust on the bleak trail of his life.

He was the Son of Darkness. His people were lost. There was, for him, room to grieve, here at the end of things, and he could finally turn away, as his mother had done so long ago. Turn away from his children. As every father must one day do, in that final moment that was death. The notion of forgiveness did not even occur to him, as he stood on the mound of moaning, tattooed bodies.

He was, after all, not the begging sort.

The one exception was Draconus. Ah, but those circumstances were unique, the crime so faceted, so intricately complicated, that it did no good to seek to prise loose any single detail. In any case, the forgiveness he asked for did not demand an answer. All that mattered was that Draconus be given those words. He could do with them as he pleased.

Anomander Rake stood, eyes fixed heavenward, facing that seething conflagration, the descending annihilation, and he did not blink, did not flinch. For he felt its answer deep within him, in the blood of Tiam, the blood of chaos.

He would stand, then, for all those he had chained here. He would stand for all the others as well. And for these poor, broken souls underfoot. He would stand, and face that ferocious chaos.

Until the very last moment. The very last moment.

Like a mass of serpents, the tattoos swarmed beneath him.

Kadaspala had waited for so long. For this one chance. Vengeance against the slayer of a beloved sister, the betrayer of Andarist, noble Andarist, husband and brother. Oh, he had come to suspect what Anomander Rake intended. Sufficient reparation? All but one Tiste Andii would answer 'yes' to that question. All but one.

*Not Kadaspala! No, not me! Not me not me! Not me not me not me!*

*I will make you fail. In this, your last gesture, your pathetic attempt at reconciliation – I will make you fail!*

*See this god I made? See it? See it see it!*

*No, you did not expect that expect that expect that, did you now? Did you now?*

Nor the knife in its hand. Nor the knife in its hand!

Teeth bared, blind Kadaspala twisted on to his back, the better to see the Son of Darkness, yes, the better to see him. Eyes were not necessary and eyes were not necessary. To see the bastard.

Standing so tall, so fierce, almost within reach.

Atop the mountain of bodies, the moaning bridge of flesh and bone, the sordid barrier at Dark's door, this living ward – so stupid so stupid! Standing there, eyes lifting up, soul facing down and down and downward – will she sense him? Will she turn? Will she see? Will she understand?

*No* to all of these things. For Kadaspala has made a god a god a god he has made a god and the knife the knife the knife—

Anomander Rake stands, and the map awakens, its power and his power, awakening.

Wandering Hold, wander no longer. Fleeing Gate, flee no more. This is what he will do. This is the sacrifice he will make, oh so worthy so noble so noble yes and clever and so very clever and who else but Anomander Rake so noble and so clever?

*All to fail!*

*Child god! It's time! Feel the knife in your hand – feel it! Now lift it high – the fool sees nothing, suspects nothing, knows nothing of how I feel, how I do not forget will never forget will never forget and no, I will never forget!*

*Reach high.*

*Stab!*

*Stab!*

*Stab!*

Storm of light, a scattered moon, a rising sun behind bruised clouds from which brown, foul rain poured down, Black Coral was a city under siege, and the Tiste Andii within it could now at last feel the death of their Lord, and with him the death of their world.

Was it fair, to settle the burden of long-dead hope upon one person, to ask of that person so much? Was it not, in fact, cowardice? He had been their strength. He had been their courage. And he had paid the Hound's Toll for them all, centuries upon centuries, and not once had he turned away.

As if to stand in his mother's stead. As if to do what she would not.

*Our Lord is dead. He has left us.*

A people grieved.

The rain descended. Kelyk ran in bitter streams on the streets, down building walls. Filled the gutters in mad rush. Droplets struck and sizzled black upon the hide of Silanah. This was the rain of usurpation, and against it they felt helpless.

*Drink deep, Black Coral.*

*And dance, yes, dance until you die.*

Monkrat struggled his way up the muddy, root-tangled slope with the last two children in his arms. He glanced up to see Spindle crouched at the crest, smeared in clay, looking like a damned gargoyle. But there was no glee in the staring eyes, only exhaustion and dread.

The unnatural rain had reached out to this broken, half-shattered forest. The old trenches and berms were black with slime, the wreckage of retaining walls reminding him of rotting bones and teeth, as if the hillside's flesh had been torn away to reveal a giant, ravaged face, which now grinned vacuously at the grey and brown sky.

The two ex-Bridgeburners had managed to find an even twenty children, four of them so close to death they'd weighed virtually nothing, hanging limp in their arms. The two men had worked through the entire night ferrying them up to the entrenchments, down into the tunnels where they could be out of the worst of the rain. They had scrounged blankets, some food, clean water in clay jugs.

As Monkrat drew closer Spindle reached down to help him scrabble over the edge. The scrawny girls dangled like straw dolls, heads lolling, as Monkrat passed each one up to Spindle, who stumbled away with them, sloshing through the muddy rivulet of the trench.

Monkrat sagged, stared down at the ground to keep the rain from his eyes and mouth as he drew in deep breaths.

A lifetime of soldiering, aye, the kind that made miserable slogs like this one old news, as familiar as a pair of leaking leather boots. So what made this one feel so different?

He could hear someone crying in the tunnel, and then Spindle's voice, soothing, reassuring.

And gods, how Monkrat wanted to weep.

Different, aye, so very different.

'Soldiers,' he muttered, 'come in all sorts.'

He'd been one kind for a long time, and had grown so sick of it he'd just walked away. And now Spindle showed up, to take him and drag him inside out and make him into a different kind of soldier. And this one, why, it felt right. It felt proper. He'd no idea . . .

He looked over as Spindle stumbled into view. 'Let's leave it at this, Spin,' he begged. 'Please.'

'I want to stick a knife in Gradithan's face,' Spindle growled. 'I want to cut out his black tongue. I want to drag the bastard up here so every one of them tykes can see what I do to him—'

'You do that and I'll kill you myself,' Monkrat vowed, baring his teeth. 'They seen too much as it is, Spin.'

'They get to see vengeance—'

'It won't feel like vengeance to them,' Monkrat said, 'it'll just be more of the same fucking horror, the same cruel madness. You want vengeance, do it in private, Spindle. Do it down there. But don't expect my help – I won't have none of it.'

Spindle stared at him. 'That's a different row of knots you're showing me here, Monkrat. Last night, you was talking it up 'bout how we'd run him down and do him good—'

'I changed my mind, Spin. These poor runts did that.' He hesitated. 'You did that, making me do what we just done.' He then laughed harshly. 'Fancy this, I'm feeling . . . redeemed. Now ain't that ironic, Spin.'

Spindle slowly settled back against the trench wall, and then sank down until he was sitting in the mud. 'Shit. How about that. And I walked all this way, looking for just what you done and found here. I was needing something, I thought they was answers . . . but I didn't even know the right questions.' He grimaced and spat. 'I still don't.'

Monkrat shrugged. 'Me neither.'

'But you been redeemed.' And that statement was almost bitter-sounding.

Monkrat struggled with his thoughts. 'When that hits you – me, when it hit me, well, what it's feeling like right now, Spin, it's like redemption finds a new meaning. It's when you don't need answers no more, because you know that anybody promising answers is fulla crap. Priest, priestess, god, goddess. Fulla crap, you understanding me?'

'That don't sound right,' Spindle objected. 'To be redeemed, someone's got to do the redeeming.'

'But maybe it don't have to be someone else. Maybe it's just doing something, being something, some*one*, and feeling that change inside – it's like you went and redeemed yourself. And nobody else's opinion matters. And you know that you still got all them questions, right ones, wrong ones, and maybe you'll be able to find an answer or two, maybe not. But it don't matter. The only thing that matters is you now know ain't nobody else has got a damned thing to do with it, with any of it. *That's* the redemption I'm talking about here.'

Spindle leaned his head back and closed his eyes. 'Lucky you, Monkrat. No, I mean that. I do.'

'You idiot. I was rotting here, seeing everything and doing nothing. If I now ended up someplace else, it's all because of you. Shit, you just done what a real priest should do – no fucking advice, no bullshit wisdom, no sympathy, none of that crap. Just a damned kick in the balls and get on with doing what you know is right. Anyway, I won't forget what you done, Spin. I won't ever forget.'

Spindle opened his eyes, and Monkrat saw an odd frown on the man's face as he stared skyward.

And then he too looked up.

A lone figure walked towards the Temple of Darkness, moccasins whispering on the slick cobbles. One hand was held up, from which thin delicate chains whirled round and round, the rings at their ends flashing. Thick rain droplets burst apart in that spinning arc, spraying against the face and the half-smile curving the lips.

Someone within that building was resisting. Was it Rake himself? Clip dearly hoped so, and if it was true, then the so-called Son of Darkness was weak, pathetic, and but moments from annihilation. Clip might have harboured demands and accusations once, all lined up and arrayed like arrows for the plucking. Bowstring thrumming, barbed truths winging unerringly through the air to strike home again and again. Yes, he had imagined such a scene. Had longed for it.

What value hard judgement when there was no one to hurt with it? Where was satisfaction? Pleasure in seeing the wounds? No, hard judgement was like rage. It thrived on victims. And the delicious flush of superiority in the delivery.

Perhaps the Dying God would reward him, for he so wanted victims. He had, after all, so much rage to give them. *Listen to me, Lord Rake. They slaughtered everyone in the Andara. Everyone! And where were you, when your worshippers were dying? Where were you? They called upon you. They begged you.*

Yes, Clip would break him. He owed his people that much.

He studied the temple as he approached, and he could sense familiarity in its lines, echoes of the Andara, and Bluerose. But this building seemed rawer, cruder, as if the stone inadvertently mimicked rough-hewn wood. Memories honoured? Or elegance forgotten? No matter.

An instant's thought shattered the temple doors, and he felt the one within recoil in pain.

He ascended the steps, walked through the smoke and dust.

Rings spinning, kelyk streaming.

The domed roof was latticed with cracks, and the rain poured down in thick, black threads. He saw a woman standing at the back, her face a mask of horror. And he saw an old man down on his knees in the centre of the mosaic floor, his head bowed.

Clip halted, frowned. *This* was his opponent? This useless, broken, feeble thing?

Where was Anomander Rake?

*He . . . he is not here. He is not even here! I am his Mortal Sword! And he is not even here!*

He screamed in fury. And power lashed out, rushing in a wall that tore tesserae from the broad floor as it ripped its way out from him, that shattered the pillars ringing the chamber so that they toppled back like felled trees. That engulfed the puny old man—

Endest Silann groaned under the assault. Like talons, the Dying God's power sank deep into him, shredding his insides. This was too vast to resist. He yielded ground, pace hastening, moments from a rout, a terrified, fatal flight—

But there was nowhere to go. If he fell now, every Tiste Andii in Black Coral would be lost. Saemankelyk would claim them all, and the city itself would succumb to that dread stain. Kurald Galain would be corrupted, made to feed an alien god's mad hunger for power.

And so, amidst a broken chorus of snapping bones and splitting flesh, Endest Silann held on.

Desperate, searching for a source of strength – anything, anyone – but Anomander Rake was gone. He had raged with power like a pillar of fire. He had been indomitable, and in reaching out a hand to settle firm on a shoulder, he could make his confidence a gift. He could make the ones who loved him do the impossible.

But now, he was gone.

And Endest Silann was alone.

He felt his soul withering, dying under this blistering assault.

And, from some vast depth, the old man recalled . . . a river.

Defiant of all light, deep, so deep where ran the currents – currents that no force could contain. He could slip into those sure streams, yes, if he but reached down . . .

But the pain, it was so fierce. It demanded all of him. He could not claw free of it, even as it devoured him.

The river – if he could but reach it –

The god possessing Clip laughed. Everything was within his grasp. He could feel his cherished High Priestess, so lovingly usurped from the Redeemer's clutches, so thoroughly seduced into the mindless dance of oblivion, the worship of wasted lives – she was defeating the Redeemer's lone guardian – he was falling back step by step, a mass of wounds, a dozen of them clearly fatal, and though somehow he still stood, still fought, he could not last much longer.

The god wanted the Redeemer. A more worthy vessel than the one named Clip, which was so venal in its thoughts, so miserable in its hurts. No better than a child burned by neglect, and now all it dreamed of was lashing out.

It believed it had come to confront its father, but there was no father here. There never had been. It had believed it was chosen to deliver justice, but the one named Clip – who had never seen justice – did not understand its true meaning, which ever belonged solely and exclusively within the cage of one's own soul.

No, the god's need for Clip was coming to an end. This vessel would be given over to saemankelyk, no different from all the others. To dance, to lie above the High Priestess and gush black semen into her womb – a deed without pleasure, for all pleasure was consumed by the Dying God's own blood, by the sweet kelyk. And she would swell with the immortal gifts a thousand times, ten thousand times.

The sweetest poison, after all, is the one eagerly shared.

The god advanced on the kneeling old man. Time to kill the fool.

Aranatha's hand was cool and dry in Nimander's grasp as she led him through an unknown realm that left him blind, stumbling, like a dog beaten senseless, the leash of that hand tugging him on and on.

'Please,' he whispered, 'where are we going?'

'To battle,' she replied, and her voice was almost unrecognizable.

Nimander felt a tremor of fear. Was this even Aranatha? Perhaps some demon had taken her place – yet the hand, yes, he knew it. Unchanged, so familiar in its ethereal touch. Like a glove with nothing in it – but no, he could feel it, firm, solid. Her hand, like everything else about her, was a mystery he had come to love.

The kiss she had given him – what seemed an eternity ago – he could feel it still, as if he had tasted something alien, something so far beyond him that he had no hope of ever understanding, of ever recognizing what it might be. A kiss, sweet as a blessing – but had it been Aranatha who had blessed him?

'Aranatha—'

'We are almost there – oh, will you defend me, Nimander? I can but reach through, not far, with little strength. It is all I have ever been able to do. But now . . . she insists. She *commands.'*

'Who?' he asked, suddenly chilled, suddenly shivering. 'Who commands you?'

'Why, Aranatha.'

*But then* – 'Who – who are you?'

'Will you defend me, Nimander? I do not deserve it. My errors are legion. My hurt I have made into your curse, a curse upon every one of you. But we are past apologies. We stand in the dust of what's done.'

'Please—'

'I do not think enough of me can reach through – not against *him*. I am sorry. If you do not stand in his way, I will fall. I will fail. I feel in your blood a whisper of . . . someone. Someone dear to me. Someone who might have withstood *him*.

'But he does not await us. He is not there to defend me. What has happened? Nimander, I have only you.'

The small hand, that had felt dry and cool and so oddly reassuring in its remoteness, now felt suddenly frail, like thin porcelain.

*She does not guide me.*

*She holds on.*

He sought comprehension from all that she had said. *The blood of someone dear. She cannot reach through, not enough to make her powerful enough against Clip, against the Dying God. She – she is not Aranatha.*

*'Nimander, I have only you.'*

*'We stand in the dust of what's done.'*

'Nimander, we have arrived.'

Tears streamed down Seerdomin's ravaged face. Overwhelmed by the helplessness, by the futility of his efforts against such an enemy, he rocked to every blow, staggered in retreat, and if he was laughing – and gods, he was – there was no humour in that terrible sound.

He hadn't had much pride to begin with – or so he had made his pose, there before the Redeemer, one of such humility – but no soldier with any spine left did not hold to a secret conviction of prowess. And although he had not lied when he'd told himself he was fighting for a god he did not believe in, well, a part of him was unassailed by that particular detail. As if it'd make no difference. And in that was revealed the secret pride he had harboured.

He would surprise her. He would astonish her by resisting far beyond what she could have anticipated. He would fight the bitch to a standstill.

How grim, how noble, how poetic. Yes, they would sing of the battle, all those shining faces in some future temple of white, virgin stone, all those shining eyes so pleased to share heroic Seerdomin's triumphant glory.

He could not help but laugh.

She was shattering him piece by pathetic piece. It was a wonder any part of his soul was left that could still recognize itself.

*See me, Spinnock Durav, old friend. Noble friend. And let us share this laugh.*

*At my stupid posing.*

*I am mocked, friend, by my own pride. Yes, do laugh, as you so wanted to do each and every time you defeated me on our tiny field of battle, there on the stained table in that damp, miserable tavern.*

*You did not imagine how I struggled to hold on to that pride, defeat after defeat, crushing loss after crushing loss.*

*So now, let us cast aside our bland masks. Laugh, Spinnock Durav, as you watch me lose yet again.*

He had not even slowed her down. Blades smashed into him from all sides, three, four at a time. His broken body did not even know where to fall – her attacks were all that kept him standing.

He'd lost his sword.

He might even have lost the arm and hand that had been wielding it. There was no telling. He had no sense beyond this knot of mocking knowledge. This lone inner eye unblinkingly fixed on its pathetic self.

And now, at last, she must have flung away all her weapons, for her hands closed round his throat.

He forced his eyes open, stared into her laughing face—

*Oh.*

*I understand now. It was you laughing.*

*You, not me. You I was hearing. Yes, I understand now—*

That meant that he, why, he'd been weeping. So much for mockery. The truth was, there was nothing left in him but self-pity. *Spinnock Durav, look away now. Please, look away.*

Her hands tightening round his throat, she lifted him from the ground, held him high. So she could watch his face as she choked the last life from

him. Watch, and laugh in his face of tears.

The High Priestess stood with hands to her mouth, too frightened to move, watching the Dying God destroy Endest Silann. He should have crumbled by now, he should have melted beneath that onslaught. And indeed it had begun. Yet, somehow, unbelievably, he still held on.

Making of himself a final, frail barrier between the Tiste Andii and this horrendous, insane god. She cowered in its shadow. It had been hubris, mad hubris, to have believed they could withstand this abomination. Without Anomander Rake, without even Spinnock Durav. And now she sensed every one of her kin being driven down, unable to lift a hand in self-defence, lying with throats exposed, as the poison rain flooded the streets, bubbled in beneath doors, through windows, eating the tiles of roofs as if it was acid, to stream down beams and paint brown every wall. Her kin had begun to feel the thirst, had begun to desire that deadly first sip – as she had.

And Endest Silann held the enemy back.

Another moment.

And then yet another—

In the realm of Dragnipur, every force had ceased fighting. Every force, every face – Draconus, Hood, Iskar Jarak, the Chained, the burning eyes of the soldiers of chaos – all turned to stare at the sky above the wagon.

And at the lone figure standing tall on the mound of bodies.

Where something extraordinary had begun.

The tattooed pattern had lifted free of the tumbled, wrinkled canvas of skins – as if the layer that had existed for all to see was now revealed as but one side, one facet, one single dimension, of a far greater manifestation. Which now rose, unfolding, intricate as a perfect cage, a web of gossamer, glistening like wet strokes of ink suspended in the air around Anomander Rake.

He slowly raised his arms.

Lying almost at Rake's feet, Kadaspala twisted in a frenzy of joy. Revenge and revenge and yes, revenge.

*Stab! Dear child! Now stab, yes and stab and stab—*

Ditch, all that remained of him, stared with one eye. He saw an elongated, tattoo-swarmed arm lifting clear, saw the knife in its hand, hovering like a rearing serpent behind Rake's back. And none of this surprised him.

The child-god's one purpose. The child-god's reason to exist.

And he was its eye. There to look upon its soul inward and outward. To feel its heart, and that heart overflowed with life, with exultation. To be born and to live was such a gift! To see the sole purpose, to hold and drive the knife deep—

And then?

And then . . . *it all ends.*

*Everything here. All of them. These bodies so warm against me. All, betrayed by the one their very lives have fed. Precious memories, host of purest regrets – but what, above all else, must always be chained to each and every soul? Why, regrets, of course. For ever chained to one's own history, one's own life story, for ever dragging that creaking, tottering burden . . .*

*To win free of those chains of regret is to shake free of humanity itself. And so become a monster.*

*Sweet child god, will you regret this?*

*'No.'*

*Why not?*

*'There . . . there will be no time.'*

*Yes, no time. For anyone. Anything. This is your moment of life – your birth, your deed, your death. By this you must measure yourself, in this handful of breaths.*

*Your maker wants you to kill.*

*You are born now. Your deed awaits. Your death hovers just beyond it. Child god, what will you do?*

And he felt the god hesitate. He felt it awaken to its own self, and to the freedom that such awakening offered. Yes, its maker had sought to shape it. Sire to child, an unbroken stream of hate and vengeance. To give its own imminent death all the meaning it demanded.

*Fail in this, and that death will have no meaning at all. 'Yes. But, if I die without achieving what I am made to do—'*

The god could sense the power that had lifted clear now rushing down from this extraordinary Tiste Andii with the silver hair, rushing down along the traceries of the countless bodies – travelling the strands of the vast web. Down, and down, into that Gate.

What was he doing?

And Ditch smiled as he answered. *Friend, know this for certain. Whatever Anomander Rake now attempts to do, he does not do it for himself.*

And that statement stunned this child god.

Not for himself? Was such a thing possible? Did one not ever choose, first and foremost, for oneself?

*For most, yes, that is true. And when these ones pass, they are quickly forgotten. Their every achievement grows tarnished. The recognition comes swift, that they were not greater than anyone else. Not smarter, not braver. Their motives, ah, such sordid things after all. For most, I said, but not this one. Not Anomander Rake.*

*'I see. Then, my mortal friend, I . . . I shall do no less.'*

And so, that long arm writhed round, twisting, and the knife stabbed down, down into Kadaspala's chest.

The blind Tiste Andii shrieked, and his blood poured over the packed bodies.

Slain by his own child. And the web drank deep its maker's blood.

Someone crawled alongside Ditch. He struggled to focus with his one dying and *dying* eye. A broad face, the skin flaking off in patches, long thick hair of black slashed through with red. She held a flint knife in one hand.

'Take it,' he whispered. 'Take it quick—'

And so she did.

Agonizing pain, fire stabbing deep into his skull, and then . . . everything began to fade.

*And the child god, having killed, now dies.*

Only one man wept for it, red tears streaming down. Only one man even knew what it had done.

Was it enough?

Apsal'ara saw Anomander Rake pause, and then look down. He smiled. 'Go, with my blessing.'

'Where?'

'You will know soon enough.'

She looked deep into his shining eyes, even as they darkened, and darkened, and darkened yet more. Until she realized what she was seeing, and a breath cold as ice rushed over her. She cried out, recalling where she had felt that cold before—

And Apsal'ara, Mistress of Thieves, tossed him the bloody eye of the god.

He caught it one-handed.

'A keepsake,' she whispered, and then rolled clear.

For this wagon was no place to be. Not with what was about to happen.

The pattern sank down, through the heaped forms, even as the Gate of Darkness rose up to meet it.

*Wander no longer.*

Anomander Rake, still standing, head tilted back, arms raised, began to dissolve, shred away, as the Gate took hold of him, as it fed upon him, upon the Son of Darkness. Upon what he desired, what he *willed to be.*

Witnessing this, Draconus sank down to his knees.

He finally understood what was happening. He finally understood what Anomander Rake had planned, all along – this, this wondrous thing.

Staring upward, he whispered, 'You ask my forgiveness? When you unravel what I have done, what I did so long ago? When you heal what I wounded, when you mend what I broke?' He raised his voice to a shout. 'Rake! There is no forgiveness you must seek – not from me, gods below, *not from any of us!'*

But there was no way to know if he had been heard. The man that had been Anomander Rake was scattered into the realm of Kurald Galain, on to its own long-sealed path that might – just might – lead to the very feet of Mother Dark.

Who had turned away.

'Mother Dark,' Draconus whispered. 'I believe you must face him now. You must turn to your children. I believe your son *insists*. *He demands it. Open your eyes, Mother Dark. See what he has done! For you, for the Tiste Andii – but not for himself. See! See and know what he has done!'*

Darkness awakened, the pattern grasping hold of the Gate itself, and sinking, sinking down, passing beyond Dragnipur, leaving for ever the dread sword—

In the Temple of Shadow, in the city of Black Coral that drowned in poison rain, Clip and the god within him stood above the huddled form of Endest Silann.

This game was over. All pleasure in the victory had palled in the absurd, stubborn resistance of the old man.

The rings spun, round and round from one hand, as he drew a dagger with the other. Simple, messy, yes, but succinct, final.

And then he saw the floor suddenly awaken with black, seething strands, forming a pattern, and icy cold breath rose in a long sigh. The sheets of spilling rain froze the instant each droplet reached the cold air, falling to shatter on the heaved cobbles and broken tesserae. And that cold lifted yet higher.

The Dying God frowned.

The pattern was spreading to cover the entire floor of the altar chamber, swarming outward. It looked strangely misshapen, as if the design possessed more dimensions than were visible.

The entire temple trembled.

Crouched on a berm at the crest of a forested slope, Spindle and Monkrat stared up at the sky directly above Black Coral. As a strange maze-like pattern appeared in the air, burgeoning out to the sides even as it began sinking down on to the city.

They saw the moment when a tendril of that pattern touched the sleeping dragon perched on its spire, and they saw it spread its wings out in massive unfolding crimson fans, saw its head lifting on its long neck, jaws opening.

And Silanah roared.

A sound that deafened. A cry of grief, of rage, of unleashed *intent*.

It launched itself into that falling pattern, that falling sky, and sailed out over the city.

Spindle laughed a vicious laugh. 'Run, Gradithan. Run all you like! That fiery bitch is hunting you!'

Aranatha stepped through, Nimander following. Gasping, he tore his hand free – for her grip had become a thing of unbearable cold, burning, too deadly to touch.

He stumbled to one side.

She had halted at the very edge of an enormous altar chamber. Where a bizarre, ethereal pattern was raining down from the domed ceiling, countless linked filaments of black threads, slowly descending, even as other tendrils rose from the floor itself.

And Nimander heard her whisper, 'The Gate. How . . . oh, my dearest son . . . *oh, Anomander . . .*'

Clip stood in the centre of the chamber, and he turned round upon the arrival of Aranatha and Nimander.

The rings spun out on their lengths of chain – and then stopped, caught in the pattern, the chains shivering taut.

Sudden agony lit Clip's face.

There was a snap as the looped chain bit through his index finger – and the rings spun and whirled up and away, speared in the pattern. Racing along every thread, ever faster, until they were nothing but blurs, and then even that vanished.

Nimander stepped past Aranatha and leapt forward, straight for Clip.

Who had staggered to one side, looking down – as if seeking his severed finger somewhere at his feet. On his face, shock and pain, bewilderment—

He had ever underestimated Nimander. An easy mistake. Mistakes often were.

So like his sire, so slow to anger, but when that anger arrived . . . Nimander grasped Clip by the front of his jerkin, swung him off his feet and in a single, ferocious surge sent him sprawling, tumbling across the floor.

Awakening the Dying God. Blazing with rage, it regained its feet and whirled to face Nimander.

Who did not even flinch as he prepared to advance to meet it, unsheathing his sword.

A fluttering touch on his shoulder stayed him.

Aranatha – *who was no longer Aranatha* – stepped past him.

But no, her feet were not even touching the floor. She rose yet higher, amidst streams of darkness that flowed down like silk, and she stared down upon the Dying God.

Who, finding himself face to face with Mother Dark – with the Elder Goddess in the flesh – *quailed*. Shrinking back, diminished.

*She does not reach through – not any more. She is here. Mother Dark is here.*

And Nimander heard her say, 'Ah, my son . . . *I accept.'*

The Gate of Darkness wandered no more. Was pursued no longer. The Gate of Darkness had found a new home, in the heart of Black Coral.

Lying in a heap of mangled flesh and bone, dying, Endest Silann rose from the river – thing of memory and of truth, that had kept him alive for so long – and opened his eyes. The High Priestess knelt at his side, one hand brushing his cheek. 'How,' she whispered, 'how could he ask this of you? How could he know—'

Through his tears, he smiled. 'All that he has ever asked of us, of me, and Spinnock Durav, and so many others, he has given us in return. Each and every time. This . . . this is his secret. Don't you understand, High Priestess? We served the one who served us.'

He closed his eyes then, as he felt another presence – one he had never imagined he would ever feel again. And in his mind, he spoke, 'For you, Mother, he did this. For us, he did this. He has brought us all home. *He has brought us all home.'*

And she replied in his mind then, her voice rising from the depths below, from the river where he had found his strength. His strength to hold, one last time. As his Lord had asked him to. As his Lord had known he would do. She said, *I understand. Come to me, then.*

*The water between us, Endest Silann, is clear.*

*The water is clear.*

*

As the ruined, lifeless remnant that had once been Seerdomin was flung to one side, Salind prepared to resume her attack, at last upon the Redeemer himself—

The god who had once been Itkovian – silent, wondering witness to a defence of unimaginable courage – now lifted his head. He could feel a presence. More than one. A mother. A son. Apart for so long, and now they were entwined in ways too mysterious, too ineffable, to grasp. And then, in a flood, he was made to comprehend the truth of gifts, the truth of redemption. He gasped.

'I am . . . shown. I am shown . . .'

And down he marched to meet her.

'Thank you, Anomander Rake, for this unexpected gift. My hidden friend. And . . . fare you well.'

The Redeemer, on his barrow of worthless wealth, need not stand outside, need not face Darkness. No, he could walk forward now, into that realm.

Down through the thinning, watery rain to where she stood, uncertain, trembling, on the very edge of abandonment.

He took Salind into his embrace.

And, holding her close, he spoke these words: *'Bless you, that you not be taken. Bless you, that you begin in your time and that you end in its fullness. Bless you, in the name of the Redeemer, in my name, against the cruel harvesters of the soul, the takers of life. Bless you, that your life and each life shall be as it is written, for peace is born of completion.'*

Against this, the Dying God had no defence. In this embrace, the Dying God came to believe that he had not marched to the Redeemer, but that the Redeemer had summoned him. An invitation he could not have seen, nor recognized. To heal what none other could heal.

Here in this pure Darkness. At the very Gate of Mother Dark, there was, in fact, no other possible place for rebirth.

The Dying God simply . . . *slipped away.*

And Salind, why, she felt soft in his arms.

The Redeemer leaves judgement to others. This frees him, you see, to cleanse all.

And the water is clear between them.

The ashes drifted down upon a still, silent scene. The legions of chaos were gone from Dragnipur, their quarry vanished. The wagon stood motionless, riven with fissures. Draconus looked round and he could see how few of the Chained were left. So many obliterated, devoured. His gaze settled for a moment upon the patch of ground where the demon Pearl had made its stand, where it had fallen, defiant to the very end.

He saw the soldier named Iskar Jarak, sitting astride his horse and staring up at the place where Anomander Rake had been, there on top of the now motionless, silent bodies – not one of whom bore any remnant of the vast tattoo.

Draconus walked up to stand beside him. 'You knew him, didn't you?'

Iskar Jarak nodded. 'He called me a friend.'

Draconus sighed. 'I wish I could say the same. I wish . . . I wish I could have known him better than I did.' He heard someone approaching and turned to see Hood. 'Lord of Death, now what? We remain chained; we cannot leave as did the Bridgeburners and the Grey Swords. There are too few of us to pull the wagon, even had we anywhere to go. I see, I understand what Rake has done, and I do not hold him any ill will. But now, I find myself wishing I had joined the others. To find an end to this—' Iskar Jarak grunted and then said, 'You spoke true, Draconus, when you said you did not know him well.'

Draconus scowled. 'What do you mean?'

'He means,' said Hood, 'we now come to the final act in this bargain. He has been true to his word, but now what comes is out of his hands. He wrought a promise, yes, but will that suffice?'

'Shame on you, Hood,' said Iskar Jarak, gathering up the reins. 'There is not a fool out there who would betray the Son of Darkness, not in this, not even now – though he has left us, though he has returned to his Mother's realm.'

'You chastise me, Iskar Jarak?'

'I do.'

The Jaghut snorted. 'Accepted,' he said.

Barathol sat on the cobbles, feeling as if every bone in his body was fractured, as if every muscle was bruised. He wanted to throw up, but struggled against the impulse, lest the convulsions kill him. He glanced yet again at that sprawled corpse with the sword embedded in its face and skull. He could see the broad, deep puncture wounds on one thigh, where the Hound had picked it up. No blood leaked from them.

Antsy came over and crouched down. 'Look at what we run into here. There's beast blood everywhere, and you, y'damned idiot, you stood down one of them monsters – with a damned axe!'

'Help me up, will you?'

Antsy stared, then sighed. 'We'd need the ox for that – you're big as a bhederin. Fine, I'll squat here and you try using me like I was a ladder, but don't blame me if my knees buckle.'

Another carriage had drawn up a short time earlier, and before it stood the High Alchemist Baruk – the one who'd turned them away – and beside him a warrior with Barghast blood, an enormous hammer strapped to his back. This one walked up to stare down at the dead Tiste Andii.

Barathol pulled himself upright, Antsy grunting under his weight, and then straightened with a soft word of thanks. He glanced over to study the others still remaining. The Toblakai warrior and the woman who seemed to be his companion. The two other Toblakai, young women – possibly even children – who might have been sisters, and a large dog bearing more scars than seemed possible. Great Ravens still lined the roof edges, or huddled like black, demonic gnomes on the street itself, silent as wraiths.

The dawn's golden sunlight streamed through the smoke hanging over the city, and he could hear nothing of the normal wakening bustle that should have already begun filling Darujhistan's streets.

Beyond this immediate gathering, others were appearing. Citizens, guards, blank-faced and empty of words, numb as refugees, none drawing too close but seemingly unwilling to leave.

The High Alchemist was standing a respectful distance away from the Barghast and the dead Tiste Andii, watching with sorrow-filled eyes. He then spoke, 'Caladan Brood, what he sought must—'

'Wait,' rumbled the Barghast. 'It must wait.' He bent down then, reached out and grasped hold of the blackbladed sword. And, with little ceremony, he worked the weapon loose, and then straightened once more.

It seemed everyone present held their breath.

Caladan Brood stared down at the weapon in his hands. Then, Barathol saw, the warrior's mouth twisted into a faint snarl, filed teeth gleaming. And he turned round and walked to the carriage, where he opened the side door and tossed the sword inside. It clanged, thumped. The door clicked shut.

The Barghast glared about, and then pointed. 'That ox and cart.'

'Caladan—'

'I will have my way here, Baruk.' His bestial eyes found Barathol. 'You, help me with him.'

Barathol bit back every groan as he took hold of the Tiste Andii's feet, watching as Brood forced his hands beneath the corpse's shoulders, down under the arms. Together, they lifted the body.

Antsy had brought the cart close and he now stood beside the ox, his expression miserable.

They laid the body of Anomander Rake on the slatted bed with its old blood stains. Brood leaned over it for a long moment. And then he drew himself upright once more and faced the High Alchemist. 'I shall build him a barrow. West of the city.'

'Caladan, please, that can wait. We have to—'

'No.' He moved to where Antsy stood and with one hand pushed the Falari away from the ox, grasping hold of the yoke. 'I will do this. None other need be burdened with this journey. It shall be Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake, together one last time.'

And so the ox began its fateful walk. A warrior at its side, the corpse of another in the cart.

The procession was forced to halt but once, not ten paces from where it started, as a short, round man in a red waistcoat had positioned himself directly in its path. Caladan Brood looked up, frowned.

The short, round man then, with surprising grace, bowed, before backing to one side.

Brood said nothing, simply tugging the ox into motion once again.

It was said that he had saved Darujhistan. Once, years ago, and now again. The Lord of Moon's Spawn, who on this night brought darkness down, darkness and cold, down upon the raging fires. Who somehow crushed the life from a growing conflagration of destruction. Saving the lives of everyone. It was said he single-handedly banished the demon Hounds. It was said, upon the instant of his death, the heart of the moon broke. And proof of that still lingered in the sky.

Who killed him? No one was sure. Rumours of Vorcan's return fuelled speculation of some vicious betrayal. A Malazan contract. A god's blind rage. But clearly it was fated, that death, for did not the worshippers of Dessembrae emerge from their temple last night? Was that not a time for the Lord of Tragedy? Oh, but it was, yes, it surely was.

And so, unbidden, people came out on to the streets. They lined the route taken by Caladan Brood to await his passing, the warrior, the ox, the cart. And when he did, he was watched in silence; and when the procession had passed, the people fell into his wake, becoming a river of humanity.

On this morning, Darujhistan was like no other city. No hawkers called out their wares. Market stalls remained shut. No fisher boats slipped their

moorings and set out on the mirror waters of the lake. Looms stayed motionless, spindles unspun. And, from every temple, bells began their toll. Discordant, sonorous, building like a broken echo, as if the city itself had found a voice, and that voice, so filled with the chaos of grief, would now speak for every citizen, for the priests and priestesses, for the very gods in their temples.

Amidst the clanging bells, Great Ravens rose into the smoky sky, wheeling above rooftops, forming a caterwauling, grisly escort. At first there were but hundreds, and then there were thousands. Swirling in a mass, as if drawn to deliver darkness to Darujhistan, as if to shroud the body below.

And, just beyond Worrytown, ascending the first of the Gadrobi Hills, a lone swordsman paused and half turned a ravaged face to the fretful music of those bells, those birds, and whatever might have been there, in his eyes, well, there was no one to witness it.

And so he set his back to Darujhistan and resumed his journey. That he had nowhere to go, at least for the moment, was without relevance. Solitude finds its own path, for the one who will not share burdens. And loneliness is no fit companion for the eternally lost, but it is the only one they know.

At this moment, another lone figure, clad in chain, sat in a tavern in Worrytown. The notion of witnessing the procession in the city was proving too . . . unpalatable. Kallor despised funerals. Celebrations of failure. Wallowing in pathos. Every living soul standing there forced to stare into mortality's grinning face – no, that was not for Kallor.

He preferred kicking that piss-grinning, shit-reeking bastard face, right between the fucking eyes.

The tavern was empty, since it seemed no one else shared his sentiments, and that was fine with him. It had always been fine with him.

Or so he told himself, as he stared down into his stolen tankard of bad ale, and listened to those infernal bells and those oversized vultures. And that chorus was hauntingly familiar. Death, ruin, grief. 'Hear that?' he said to his tankard, 'they're playing our song.'

Blend walked into K'rul's Bar and found it empty, save for the hunched figure of the historian, who sat at his chosen table, staring at the stained, pitted wood. She walked over and looked down at him. 'Who died?'

Duiker did not look up. 'Not *who*, Blend. More like *what.* What died? More, I think, than we'll ever know.'

She hesitated. 'Have you checked on Picker?'

'She walked out of here a quarter-bell ago.'

*'What?'*

'Said she'd be back.'

'That's it? That's all she said?'

'Something else. Something about "them damned torcs".' He finally glanced up, his eyes bleak as ever. 'Sit down, Blend. Please. I don't like being alone, not right now. She'll be back.'

At that moment a bell began ringing overhead and both Malazans ducked at the deafening clangour.

'Gods below!' swore Blend. 'Who's up in the belfry?'

Duiker was frowning. 'The only other person here is Scillara. I suppose . . .' and then he fell silent, and the wasted misery in his eyes deepened.

Blend sat down. 'She'd better get tired soon, or I'll have to go up there.'

They sat, weathering the clanging. Blend studied Duiker, wondering at his ever-deepening despondency. And then a realization struck her. 'I thought we unshipped that bell.'

'We did, Blend. It's in the cellar.'

'Oh.'

No wonder he looked so wretched.

'Plan on cutting off its head?' Samar Dev asked.

Karsa Orlong was standing over the Hound he had killed. At her question he grunted. 'I could use a kitchen knife to finish the job. See how my blade cut through that spine? Like chopping down a tree.'

She found she was trembling, decided it was exhaustion. 'They're your daughters, aren't they?'

Karsa glanced over at the two Toblakai girls, who stood watching, silent, expectant. 'I raped a mother and a daughter.'

'Ah, well, isn't that nice.'

'It was my right.'

'Funny, that.'

'What?'

'That idea of "rights". The way that claiming a right so often results in someone else losing theirs. At which point it all comes down to who's holding the biggest sword.'

'I won that right when I killed their men. This was tribal war, witch.' He paused. 'And I was young.'

'Gods below, you're actually telling me you have regrets?'

The Toblakai turned away from the dead Hound and faced his daughters. 'I have many,' he answered. 'But, not these two.'

'And if they feel differently about it, Karsa?'

'Why should they? I gave them life.'

'I think,' Samar Dev said, 'that I shall never understand you.' She eyed the girls. 'Do they know what we're saying? Of course not, they couldn't have learned any Seven Cities language. I've not seen you speak to them, Karsa. What are you waiting for?'

'I am waiting,' he replied, 'for when I can think of something to say.'

At that moment another woman emerged from an alley mouth and, gaze fixed on Karsa Orlong, walked over. 'Toblakai,' she said, 'I have a message

to deliver to you.' She was speaking Malazan.

'I don't know you,' Karsa said to her in the same language.

'The feeling's mutual,' she snapped, 'but let's not let that get in the way.' She hesitated. 'Do you want this message private, or maybe I should just shout it so everybody can hear.'

Karsa shot Samar Dev an amused look. 'Did I ever tell you, witch, that I liked Malazans?'

'Yes,' she replied, sighing.

'You need not shout, Malazan. Nor will we hide in some corner. So, tell me this mysterious message, but first, tell me who it is from.'

'All right. It's from Hood, I think.'

Samar Dev snorted. 'Let me guess. "Keep up the good work, yours truly".'

The Malazan woman regarded her. 'Well now, after all this is done, permit me to buy you a drink.'

Samar Dev's brows rose.

'The message,' Karsa growled.

'Right. It's this. You must not leave Darujhistan.'

'And if I do?'

'Then you will have lost your one opportunity to fulfil a vow you once made.'

'I have made many vows.'

'I'm shocked to hear that.'

Karsa was smiling, but something deadly had awakened in it. 'Will you tell me more?'

The woman hesitated again. 'I'm reconsidering. This really needs to be private – no offence, Witch – he called you that, yes? It's just that—'

'Tell me,' Karsa demanded.

Samar Dev was impressed to see that the Malazan woman did not flinch from Karsa's dangerous smile. 'Toblakai, you will be needed.'

'To do what?'

'Why, to kill a god.'

'Which god?'

The Malazan woman stared, discomfited for the first time since arriving. 'You were supposed to run away when I told you that. Any sane person would.'

'Then you found the wrong warrior,' said Samar Dev, her mouth dry. 'And you were right, I wish I hadn't heard that. I'm going to walk away now, so you can finish delivering your message.'

'Go to K'rul's Bar,' said the Malazan. 'Tell them Picker sent you. Breakfast, decent wine, and if Blend offers to prepare you a bath and maybe soap you down some, be nice to her.'

'Generous of you, I think.'

'That's me,' Picker said.

Samar Dev set out in search of K'rul's Bar. A breakfast sounded very fine indeed, as did the notion of decent wine. As for the bath, well, if it was indeed offered, why, she suspected she'd be too weary to resist.

Tens of thousands now followed the ox cart and its burden as it made its way down from Lakefront and into the Gadrobi District. Bells rang; the Great Ravens wheeled, adding their wretched cries. And already, from the hills beyond Two-Ox Gate, clouds of dust rose into the morning sky.

Caladan Brood did not need to hew each stone, or drive spade into stony soil. The warren of Tennes had been awakened, and the flesh of Burn was given new shape and new purpose. In this chosen place, a hill was being transformed. And by the time Brood led the ox up to the barrow's passage entrance, and took the body of Anomander Rake into his arms, the chamber

within was ready. And when he then emerged, pausing as if startled upon seeing the tens of thousands of silent mourners forming a ring round the hill's base, an enormous capstone had risen into view, splitting the grassy ground.

And when with one hand Caladan Brood had guided it into place, he drew his hammer. To seal the barrow for ever.

Anomander Rake was interred in darkness. Weaponless, accompanied by no gifts, no wealth, no treasured possessions. His flesh was not treated against the ravages of decay. The blood and gore covering his face was not even washed away. None of these gestures belonged to the Tiste Andii, for whom the soul's departure leaves the flesh blind, insensate and indifferent.

Dying delivers one into the river of darkness, that passes into and out of the ruined city of Kharkanas, the womb long dead, long abandoned. Into the river, and the river must travel on, ever on.

Caladan Brood sealed the barrow, and upon the capstone of bleached dolomite he set a symbol, carved deep into the stone's face. An ancient Barghast glyph, its meaning precise and yet a thing of countless layers – although this is known only to those who in life come to face it directly.

A single Barghast glyph.

Which said *Grief.*

When Baruk had vanished inside his carriage and the conveyance had rumbled off on its way to the High Alchemist's venerable estate; when the huge Toblakai warrior and Picker had concluded their conversation, and each had gone their own way, the former trailed by his daughters and the limping dog; when the place where two warriors had met in mortal combat bore nothing but a scattering of masonry, sun-darkened swaths of spilled blood and the motionless forms of dead Hounds of Light – when all this had come to pass, two figures emerged from the shadows.

One was barely visible despite the harsh sunlight: ghostly, leaning on a cane. And after a time of silence, this one spoke in a rasping voice. To begin with, a single word: 'Well?'

And his companion replied in kind. 'Well.'

The cane tapped a few times on the cobbles.

The companion then said, 'It's out of our hands now, until the end.'

'Until the end,' agreed Shadowthrone. 'You know, Cotillion, I never much liked Caladan Brood.'

'Really? I never knew.'

'Do you think . . .'

'I think,' said Cotillion, 'that we need not worry on that count.'

Shadowthrone sighed. 'Are we pleased? It was . . . delicate . . . the timing. Are we pleased? We should be.'

'The damned Hounds of Light,' said Cotillion, 'that was unexpected. Two, yes. But ten? Gods below.'

'Hmph! I was more worried by my Magus's temporary sanity.'

'Is that what you call it?'

'He had a chance – a slim one, but he had a chance. Imagine that one wielding Dragnipur.'

Cotillion regarded his companion. 'Are you suggesting he would not have relinquished it? Ammanas, really. That was all *your* play. I'm not fooled by his seemingly going rogue on you. You vowed you'd not try to steal the sword. But of course you never mentioned anything about one of your High Priests doing it for you.'

'And it would have been mine!' Shadowthrone hissed in sudden rage. 'If not for that confounded fat man with the greasy lips! *Mine!'*

'Iskaral Pust's, you mean.'

Shadowthrone settled down once more, tapped his cane. 'We'd have seen eye to eye, eventually.'

'I doubt it.'

'Well, who cares what *you* think, anyway?'

'So where is he now?'

'Pust? Back in the temple, poring through the archives of the Book of Shadows.'

'Looking for what?'

'Some provision, any provision, for a High Priest of Shadow having two wives.'

'Is there one?'

'How should I know?'

'Well,' Cotillion said, 'didn't you write it?'

Shadowthrone shifted about. 'I was busy.'

'So who did?'

Shadowthrone would not answer.

Cotillion's brows rose. 'Not Pust! The Book of Shadows, where he's proclaimed the Magus of the High House Shadow?'

'It's called delegation,' Shadowthrone snapped.

'It's called idiocy.'

'Well, *hee hee*. I dare say he'll find what he's looking for, won't he?'

'Aye, with the ink still wet.'

They said nothing then for a time, until Cotillion drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, and then said, 'We should give him a few days, I think.' And this time, he was not speaking of Iskaral Pust.

'Unless you want to get cut to pieces, yes, a few days.'

'I wasn't sure he'd, well, accept. Right up until the moment he . . .' Cotillion winced and looked up the street, as if straining to see some lone, wandering, lost figure dragging a sword in one hand. But no, he wouldn't be

coming back. 'You know, I did offer to explain. It might have eased his conscience. But he wasn't interested.'

'Listen to these damned bells,' said Shadowthrone. 'My head's hurting enough as it is. Let's go, we're done here.'

And so they were, and so they did.

Two streets from his home, Bellam Nom was grasped from behind and then pushed up against a wall. The motion ripped pain through his broken arm. Gasping, close to blacking out, he stared into the face of the man accosting him, and then slumped. 'Uncle.' And he saw, behind Rallick, another vaguely familiar face. 'And . . . Uncle.'

Frowning, Rallick eased back. 'You look a mess, Bellam.'

And Torvald said, 'The whole damned Nom clan is out hunting for you.'

'Oh.'

'It won't do having the heir to the House going missing for days,' Torvald said. 'You've got responsibilities, Bellam. Look at us, even *we* weren't so wayward in our young days, and we're heirs to nothing. So now we've got to escort you home. See how you've burdened us?'

And they set out.

'I trust,' Rallick said, 'that whoever you tangled with fared worse, Bellam.'

'Ah, I suppose he did.'

'Well, that's something at least.'

After they had ushered the young man through the gate, peering after him to make sure he actually went inside, Rallick and Torvald set off.

'That was a good one,' Rallick said, 'all that rubbish about us in our youth.'

'The challenge was in keeping a straight face.'

'Well now, we weren't so bad back then. At least until you stole my girlfriend.'

'I knew you hadn't forgotten!'

'I suggest we go now to sweet Tiserra, where I intend to do my best to steal her back.'

'You're not actually expecting she'll make us breakfast, are you?'

'Why not?'

'Tiserra is nobody's servant, cousin.'

'Oh, well. You can keep her, then.'

Torvald smiled to himself. It was so easy working Rallick. It had always been so easy, getting him to end up thinking precisely what Torvald wanted him to think.

Rallick walked beside him, also pleased as from the corner of his eye he noted Torvald's badly concealed, faintly smug smile. Putting his cousin at ease had never taxed Rallick.

It was a comfort, at times, how some things never changed.

When Sister Spite stepped on to the deck, she saw Cutter near the stern, leaning on the rail and staring out over the placid lake. She hid her surprise and went to join him.

'I am returning to Seven Cities,' she said.

He nodded. 'That's close enough.'

'Ah, well, I am pleased to have your company, Cutter.'

He glanced over at her. 'Get what you wanted?'

'Of course not, and . . . mostly.'

'So, you're not upset?'

'Only in so far as I failed in sinking my teeth into my sister's soft throat. But that can wait.'

If he was startled by her words, he did not show it. 'I would have thought you'd want to finish it, since you came all this way.'

'Oh, there are purposes and there are purposes to all that we do, my young friend. In any case, it is best that I leave immediately, for reasons I care not to explain. Have you said your goodbyes?'

He shrugged. 'I think I did that years ago, Spite.'

'Very well, shall we cast off?'

A short time later, the ship slipping easily just out from the shoreline, on a westward heading, they both stood at the port rail and observed the funeral procession's end, there at a new long barrow rising modestly above the surrounding hills. Crowds upon crowds of citizens ringed the mound. The silence of the scene, with the bells faint and distant, made it seem ethereal, like a painted image, solemn through the smoke haze. They could see the cart, the ox.

Spite sighed. 'My sister once loved him, you know.'

'Anomander Rake? No, I didn't know that.'

'His death marks the beginning.'

'Of what?'

'The end, Cutter.'

He had no response to that. A few moments drifted past. 'You said she loved him once. What happened?'

'He acquired Dragnipur. At least, I imagine that was the cause. She is well named, is my sister.'

*Envy.*

Cutter shot her a glance, thinking of her own name, this beautiful woman at his side, and wisely he said nothing, nothing at all.

The bell that wasn't there had finally stopped its manic ringing, and Scillara was able to climb back on to the temple roof, so that she could gaze out over the city. She could see the lake, where one lone ship had unfurled sails to ride the morning breeze. She knew those sails and she tracked them for a time.

Who was on board? Well, Spite for certain. And, if he'd any sense, Barathol. With smiling Chaur at his side, the giant child with his childish love that would never know betrayal, at least until the day, hopefully decades hence, when the blacksmith bowed to old age and took to bed for the last time. She could almost see him, his face, the deep wrinkles, the dimming of his dark eyes, and all the losses of his life falling away, veil by veil, until he ceased looking outward entirely.

Chaur would not understand. What he would feel would crash blind as a boar in a thicket, crash right through him. It would be a dreadful thing to witness, to see the poor child tangled in the clutches of pain he could not understand, and loss he could not fathom.

Who would care for him then?

And what of dear Scillara? Why was she not with them? She wished she had an answer to that. But she had come to certain truths about herself. Destined, she now believed, to provide gentle comfort to souls in passing. A comforting bridge, yes, to ease the loneliness of their journey.

She seemed doomed ever to open her arms to the wrong lover, to love fully yet never be so loved in return. It made her pathetic stock in this retinue of squandered opportunities that scrawled out the history of a clumsy life.

Could she live with that? Without plunging into self-pity? Time would tell, she supposed.

Scillara packed her pipe, struck sparks and drew deep.

A sound behind her made her turn—

As Barathol stepped close, one hand sliding up behind her head, leaned forward and kissed her. A long, deep, determined kiss. When he finally pulled away, she gasped. Eyes wide, staring up into his own.

He said, 'I am a blacksmith. If I need to forge chains to keep you, I will.'

She blinked, and then gave him a throaty laugh. 'Careful, Barathol. Chains bind both ways.'

His expression was grave. 'Can you live with that?'

'Give me no choice.'

Ride, my friends, the winds of love! There beside a belfry where a man and a woman find each other, and out in the taut billows of sails where another man stares westward and dreams of sweet moonlight, a garden, a woman who is the other half of his soul.

Gentle gust through a door, sweet sigh, as a guard comes home and is engulfed by his wife, who had suffered an eternal night of fears, but she holds him now and all is well, all is right, and children yell in excitement and dance in the kitchen.

The river of grief has swept through Darujhistan, and morning waxes in its wake. There are lives to rebuild, so many wounds to mend.

A bag of coins thumps on to the tabletop before a woman new to her blessed widowhood, and she feels as if she has awakened from a nightmare of decades, and this is, for her, a private kind of love, a moment for herself and no one else.

Picker strides into the bar and there waits Blend, tears in her eyes, and Samar Dev watches from a table and she smiles but that smile is wistful and she wonders what doors wait for her, and which ones will prove unlocked, and what might lie beyond.

And in a temple, Iskaral Pust blots dry the ink and crows over his literary genius. Mogora looks on with jaded eyes, but is already dreaming of alliances with Sordiko Qualm.

The bhokarala sit in a clump, exchanging wedding gifts.

Two estate guards, after a busy night, burst into a brothel, only to find nobody there. Love will have to wait, and is anyone really surprised at their ill luck? At the threshold of a modest home and workshop, Tiserra stands facing the two loves of her life. And, for the briefest of moments, her imagination runs wild. She then recovers herself and, in a light tone, asks, 'Breakfast?'

Torvald is momentarily startled.

Rallick just smiles.

There is a round man, circumference unending, stepping ever so daintily through rubble on his way back to the Phoenix Inn. It will not do to be a stranger to sorrow, if only to cast sharp the bright wonder of sweeter things. And so, even as he mourns in his own fashion (with cupcakes), so too he sighs wistfully. Love is a city, yes indeed, a precious city, where a thousand thousand paths wend through shadow and light, through air stale and air redolent with blossoms, nose-wrinkling perfume and nose-wrinkling dung, and there is gold dust in the sewage and rebirth in the shedding of tears.

And at last, we come to a small child, walking into a duelling school, passing through gilded streams of sunlight, and he halts ten paces from a woman sitting on a bench, and he says something then, something without sound.

A moment later two imps trundle into view and stop in their tracks, staring at Harllo, and then they squeal and rush towards him.

The woman looks up.

She is silent for a long time, watching Mew and Hinty clutching the boy. And then a sob escapes her and she makes as if to turn away—

But Harllo will have none of that. 'No! I've come home. That's what this is, it's me coming home!'

She cannot meet his eyes, but she is weeping none the less. She waves a hand. 'You don't understand, Harllo. That time, that time – I have no good memories of that time. Nothing good came of it, nothing.'

'That's not true!' he shouts, close to tears. 'That's not true. There was me.'

As Scillara now knew, some doors you cannot hold back. Bold as truth, some doors get kicked in.

Stonny did not know how she would manage this. But she would. She would. And so she met her son's eyes, in a way that she had never before permitted herself to do. And that pretty much did it.

And what was said by Harllo, in silence, as he stood there, in the moments before he was discovered? Why, it was this: *See, Bainisk, this is my mother.*

# EPILOGUE

Rage and tell me then
Not every tale is a gift
When anguish gives the knife
One more twist
And blood is thinned by tears

Cry out the injustice
Not every tale is a gift
In a world harsh with strife
Leaving us bereft
Deeds paling through the years

And I will meet your eye
Neither flinching nor shy
As I fold death inside life
And face you down
With a host of mortal fears

And I will say then
Every tale is a gift
And the scars borne by us both
Are easily missed
In the distance between us

*Bard's Curse*
Fisher kel Tath

Nimander stood on the roof of the keep, leaning with his arms on the battlement's cold stone, and watched the distant figure of Spinnock Durav as he crossed the old killing ground. A fateful, fretful meeting awaited that warrior, and Nimander was worried, for it was by Nimander's own command that Spinnock now went to find the woman he loved.

Skintick arrived to stand at his side.

'It's madness,' said Nimander. 'It should be Durav on the throne. Or Korlat.'

'It's your lack of confidence we find so charming,' Skintick replied.

'Is that supposed to be amusing?'

'Well, it amuses me, Nimander. I settle for that, most times. Listen, it's simple and it's complicated. His blood courses strong within you, stronger than you realize. And like it or not, people will follow you. Listen to you. Spinnock Durav was a good example, I'd venture. He took your command like a body blow, and then he set out to follow it. Not a word of complaint – your irritated impatience stung him.'

'Precisely my point. It was none of my business in the first place. I had no right to be irritated or impatient.'

'You were both because you cared, and you barely know the man. You may not know it, but you made friends in that throne room, right then and right there. Korlat's eyes shone. And the High Priestess actually *smiled.* Like a mother, both proud and indulgent. They are yours, Nimander.' He hesitated, and then added, 'We all are.'

Nimander wasn't ready to contemplate such notions. 'How fares Nenanda?'

'Recovering, as thin-skinned as ever.'

'And Clip?'

Skintick shrugged. 'I wish I could say *humbled.'*

'I wish you could as well.'

'He's furious. Feels cheated, personally slighted. He'll be trouble, I fear, an eternal thorn in your side.'

Nimander sighed. 'They probably felt the same at the Andara, which was why they sent him to find us.'

'On a wave of cheering fanfare, no doubt.'

Nimander turned. 'Skin, I truly do not know if I can do this.'

'Unlike Anomander Rake, you are not alone, Nimander. The burden no longer rests upon one person. She is with us now.'

'She could have left us Aranatha.'

'Aranatha was not Aranatha for some time – perhaps you don't remember when she was younger. Nimander, our sister was a simpleton. Barely a child in her mind, no matter that she grew into a woman.'

'I always saw it as . . . innocence.'

'There again, your generosity of spirit.'

'My inability to discriminate, you mean.'

They were silent for a time. Nimander glanced up at the spire. 'There was a dragon up there.'

'Silanah. Er, very close to Anomander Rake, I'm told.'

'I wonder where she went?'

'You could always awaken Tiam's blood within you, and find out, Nimander.'

'Ah, no thank you.'

Spinnock Durav had moved out past Night and had reached the razed stretch that had been a squalid encampment, where a monastery was now under construction, although for the moment a military tent was the temple wherein dwelt Salind, the High Priestess of the Redeemer.

Would she accept him?

*Mother Dark, hear me please. For Spinnock Durav, who stood in your son's place, again and again. Give him peace. Give him happiness.*

At the Great Barrow there were other workers, pilgrims for the most part, raising a lesser burial mound, to hold the bones of someone named Seerdomin, who had been chosen to stand eternal vigilance at the foot of the Redeemer. It was odd and mysterious, how such notions came to pass. Nimander reminded himself that he would have to send a crew out there, to see if they needed any help.

'What are you thinking, Lord Nimander?'

Nimander winced at the title. 'I was thinking,' he said, 'about prayers. How they feel . . . cleaner when one says them not for oneself, but on behalf of someone else.' He shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. 'I was praying for Spinnock. Anyway, that's what I was thinking. Well, the High Priestess says there are things we need to talk about. I'd best be off.'

As he turned, Skintick said, 'It's said that Anomander Rake would stand facing the sea.'

'Oh, and?'

'Nothing. It's just that I've noticed that you've taken to staring out over land, out to that Great Barrow. Is there something about the Redeemer that interests you?'

And Nimander just smiled, and then he went inside, leaving Skintick staring after him.

In a chamber devoted to the most arcane rituals, forty-seven steps beneath the ground floor of the High Alchemist's estate, two iron anvils had been placed within an inscribed circle. The torches lining the walls struggled to lift flames above their blackened mouths.

Sitting at a table off to one side was the witch, Derudan, a hookah at her side, smoke rising from her as if she steamed in the chilly air. At the edge of the circle stood Vorcan, who now called herself Lady Varada, wrapped tight inside a dark grey woollen cloak. The Great Raven, Crone, walked as if

pacing out the chamber's dimensions, her head crooking again and again to regard the anvils.

Baruk was by the door, eyeing Vorcan and Derudan. The last of the T'orrud Cabal. The taste in his mouth was of ashes.

There were servants hidden in the city, and they were even now at work. To bring about a fell return, to awaken one of the Tyrants of old. Neither woman in this room was unaware of this, and the fear was palpable in its persistent distraction.

The fate of Darujhistan – and of the T'orrud Cabal – was not their reason for being here, however.

The door swung open with a creak and in strode Caladan Brood, carrying in one hand the sword Dragnipur. He paused just inside and glowered across at Vorcan, and then Derudan. 'This has nothing to do with you,' he told them.

Vorcan bowed. 'Forgive us, Warlord, but we will stay.'

Clearing his throat, Baruk said, 'My fault, Warlord. It seems they do not trust me – not in such close proximity to that weapon.'

Brood bared his teeth. 'Am I not guardian enough?'

Seeing Vorcan's faint smile, Baruk said, 'The lack of trust is mutual, I am afraid. I am more at ease with these two here in front of us, rather than, um, my starting at every shadow.'

The warlord continued staring at Vorcan. 'You'd try for me, Assassin?'

Crone cackled at the suggestion.

'I assume,' Vorcan said, 'there will be no need.'

Brood glanced at Baruk. 'What a miserable nest you live in, High Alchemist. Never mind, it's time.'

They watched him walk into the circle. They watched him set Dragnipur down, bridging the two anvils. He took a single step back, then, and grew still as he stared down at the sword.

'It is beautiful,' he said. 'Fine craftsmanship.'

'May you one day be able to compliment its maker in person,' Vorcan said. 'Just don't expect me to make the introduction. I don't know where they will all spill out, so long as it isn't in my city.'

Brood shrugged. 'I am the wrong one from whom to seek reassurance, Assassin.' He drew the huge hammer from his back and readied the weapon. 'I'm just here to break the damned thing.'

No one spoke then, and not one of the watchers moved a muscle as the warlord took a second step back and raised the hammer over his head. He held it poised for a moment. 'I'd swear,' he said in a low rumble, 'that Burn's smiling in her sleep right now.'

And down came the hammer.

Fisher was waiting in the garden, strangely fresh, renewed, when Lady Envy returned home. She had walked in the midst of thousands, out to a barrow. She had watched, as had all the others, as if a stranger to the one fallen. But she was not that.

She found a delicate decanter of the thinnest Nathii greenglass, filled with amber wine, and collected two goblets, and walked out to join the bard. He rose from the bench he had been sitting on and would have taken a step closer to her, but then he saw her expression.

The bard was wise enough to hide his sigh of relief. He watched her fill both goblets to the brim. 'What happened?' he asked.

She would not speak of her time at the barrow. She would, in fact, never speak of it. Not to this man, not to anyone. 'Caladan Brood,' she replied, 'that's what happened. And there's more.'

'What?'

She faced him, and then drained her goblet. 'My father. *He's back.'*

*Oh frail city . . .*

An empty plain it was, beneath an empty sky. Weak, flickering fire nested deep in its ring of charred stones, now little more than ebbing coals. A night, a hearth, and a tale now spun, spun out.

*'Has thou ever seen Kruppe dance?'*

*'No. I think not. Not by limb, not by word.'*

*'Then, my friends, settle yourselves for this night. And witness . . .'*

And so they did. Bard and Elder God, and oh how Kruppe danced. Blind to the threat of frowns, blind to dismay, rolling eyes, blind even to contempt – although none of these things came from these two witnesses. But beyond this frail ring of warm light, out in that vast world so discordant, so filled with tumult, judgement harsh and gleeful in cruelty, there can be no knowing the cast of arrayed faces.

No matter.

One must dance, and dance did Kruppe, oh, yes, he did dance.

The night draws to an end, the dream dims in the pale silver of awakening. Kruppe ceases, weary beyond reason. Sweat drips down the length of his ratty beard, his latest affectation.

A bard sits, head bowed, and in a short time he will say *thank you*. But for now he must remain silent, and as for the other things he would say, they are between him and Kruppe and none other. Fisher sits, head bowed. While an Elder God weeps.

The tale is spun. Spun out.

*Dance by limb, dance by word. Witness!*

This ends the Eighth Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON'S THE MAZALAN
BOOK OF THE FALLEN CONTINUES IN

# Dust of Dreams

Here's the Prologue as a taster . . .

# PROLOGUE

***Elan Plain, west of Kolanse***

There was light, and then there was heat.

He knelt, carefully taking each brittle fold in his hands, ensuring that every crease was perfect, that nothing of the baby was exposed to the sun. He drew the hood in until little more than a fist-sized hole was left for her face, her features grey smudges in the darkness, and then he gently picked her up and settled her into the fold of his left arm. There was no hardship in this.

They'd camped near the only tree in any direction, but not under it. The tree was a gamleh tree and the gamlehs were angry with people. In the dusk of the night before, its branches had been thick with fluttering masses of grey leaves, at least until they drew closer. This morning the branches were bare.

Facing west, Rutt stood holding the baby he had named Held. The grasses were colourless. In places they had been scoured away by the dry wind, wind that had then carved the dust out round their roots to expose the pale bulbs so the plants withered and died. After the dust and bulbs had gone, sometimes gravel was left. Other times it was just bedrock, black and gnarled. Elan Plain was losing its hair, but that was something Badalle might say, her green eyes fixed on the words in her head. There was no question she had a gift, but some gifts, Rutt knew, were curses in disguise.

Badalle walked up to him now, her sun-charred arms thin as stork necks, the hands hanging at her sides coated in dust and looking oversized beside her skinny thighs. She blew to scatter the flies crusting her mouth and intoned:

*'Rutt he holds Held*
*Wraps her good*
*In the morning*
*And then up he stands . . .'*

'Badalle,' he said, knowing she was not finished with her poem but knowing, as well, that she would not be rushed, 'we still live.'

She nodded.

These few words of his had become a ritual between them, although the ritual never lost its taint of surprise, its faint disbelief. The ribbers had been especially hard on them last night, but the good news was that maybe they had finally left the Fathers behind.

Rutt adjusted the baby he'd named Held in his arm, and then he set out, hobbling on swollen feet, westward, into the heart of the Elan.

He did not need to look back to see that the others were following. Those who could, did. The ribbers would come for the rest. He'd not asked to be the head of the snake. He'd not asked for anything, but he was the tallest and might be he was the oldest. Might be he was thirteen, could be he was fourteen.

Behind him Badalle said,

*'And walks he starts*
*Out of that morning*
*With Held in his arms*
*And his ribby tail*
*It snakes out*
*Like a tongue*
*From the sun.*
*You need the longest*
*Tongue*
*When searching for*
*Water*
*Like the sun likes to do . . .'*

Badalle watched him for a time, watched as the others fell into his wake. She would join the ribby snake soon enough. She blew at the flies, but of course they came right back, clustering round the sores puffing her lips, hopping up to lick at the corners of her eyes. She had been a beauty once, with these green eyes and her long fair hair like tresses of gold. But beauty bought smiles for only so long. *When the larder gapes empty, beauty gets smudged.* 'And the flies,' she whispered, 'make patterns of suffering. And suffering is ugly.'

She watched Rutt. He was the head of the snake. He was the fangs, too, but that last bit was for her alone, her private joke.

This snake had forgotten how to eat.

She'd been among the ones who'd come up from the south, from the husks of homes in Korbanse, Krosis and Kanros. Even the isles of Otpelas. Some, like her, had walked along the coast of the Pelasiar Sea, and then to the western edge of Stet which had once been a great forest, and there they found the wooden road, Stump Road they sometimes called it. Trees cut on end to make flat circles, pounded into rows that went on and on. Other children then arrived from Stet itself, having walked the old stream beds wending through the grey tangle of shattered tree-fall and diseased shrubs. There were signs that Stet had once been a forest to match its old name which was Forest Stet, but Badalle was not entirely convinced – all she could see was a gouged wasteland, ruined and ravaged. There were no trees standing anywhere. They called it Stump Road, but other times it was Forest Road, and that too was a private joke.

Of course, someone had needed lots of trees to make the road, so maybe there really had once been a forest there. But it was gone now.

At the northern edge of Stet, facing out onto the Elan Plain, they had come upon another column of children, and a day later yet another one joined them, down from the north, from Kolanse itself, and at the head of this one, there had been Rutt, carrying Held. Tall, his shoulders, elbows, knees and ankles were protruding and the skin round them slack and stretched. He had large, luminous eyes. He still had all his teeth, and when

the morning arrived, each morning, he was there, at the head. The fangs, and the rest just followed.

They all believed he knew where he was going, but they didn't ask him since the belief was more important than the truth, which was that he was just as lost as all the rest.

*'All day Rutt holds Held*
*And keeps her*
*Wrapped*
*In his shadow.*
*It's hard*
*Not to love Rutt*
*But Held doesn't*
*And no-one loves Held*
*But Rutt'*

Visto had come from Okan. When the starvers and the bone-skinned inquisitors marched on the city his mother had sent him running, hand in hand with his sister, who was two years older than he was, and they'd run down streets between burning buildings and screams filled the night and the starvers kicked in doors and dragged people out and did terrible things to them, while the bone-skins watched on and said it was necessary, everything here was necessary.

They'd pulled his sister out of his grip, and it was her scream that still echoed in his skull. Each night since then, he had ridden it on the road of sleep, from the moment his exhaustion took him until the moment he awoke to the dawn's pale face.

He ran for what seemed forever, westward and away from the starvers, eating what he could, savaged by thirst. And when he'd outdistanced the starvers, the ribbers showed up, huge packs of gaunt dogs with red-rimmed eyes and no fear of anything. And then the Fathers, all wrapped in black, who plunged into the ragged camps on the roads and stole children away. Once he and a few others had come upon one of their old night-holds and had seen for themselves the small split bones mottled blue and grey in the

coals of the hearth, and so understood what the Fathers did to the children they took.

Visto remembered his first sight of Forest Stet, a range of denuded hills filled with torn-up stumps and roots, reminding him of one of the bone-yards that ringed the city that had been his home, left after the last of the livestock had been slaughtered. And at that moment, looking upon what had once been a forest, Visto had realized that the entire world was now dead. There was nothing left and nowhere to go.

Yet onward he trudged, now just one among what must be tens of thousands, maybe even more, a road of children leagues long. And for all that died along the way, others arrived to take their place. He had not imagined that so many children existed. They were like a great herd, the last great herd, the sole source of food and nourishment for the world's last, desperate hunters.

Visto was fourteen years old. He had not yet begun his growth-spurt and now never would. His belly was round and rock hard, protruding so that his spine curved deep just above his hips. He walked like a pregnant woman, feet splayed, bones aching. He was full of Satra Riders, the worms inside his body endlessly swimming and getting bigger by the day. When they were ready – soon – they would pour out of him. From his nostrils, from the corners of his eyes, from his ears, from his belly button, his penis and his anus, and from his mouth. And to those who witnessed, he would seem to deflate, skin crinkling and collapsing down into weaving furrows running the length of his body. He would seem to instantly turn into an old man. And then he would die.

Visto was almost impatient for that. He hoped ribbers would eat his body and so take in the eggs the Satra Riders had left behind, so that they too would die. Better yet, Fathers – but they weren't that stupid, he was sure – no, they wouldn't touch him and that was too bad.

The Snake was leaving behind Forest Stet, and the wooden road gave way to a trader's track of dusty, rutted dirt, wending out into the Elan. So, he would die on the plain, and his spirit would pull away from the shrunken

thing that had been its body, and begin the long journey back home. To find his sister. To find his mother.

And already, his spirit was tired, so tired, of walking.

At day's end, Badalle forced herself to climb an old Elan longbarrow with its ancient tree at the far end – grey leaves fluttering – from which she could turn and look back along the road, eastward, as far as her eyes could retrace the day's interminable journey. Beyond the mass of the sprawled camp, she saw a wavy line of bodies stretching to the horizon. This had been an especially bad day, too hot, too dry, the lone waterhole a slough of foul, vermin-ridden mud, filled with rotting insect carcasses that tasted like dead fish.

She stood, looking for a long time on the ribby length of the Snake. Those that fell on the track had not been pushed aside, simply trampled on or stepped over, and so the road was now a road of flesh and bone, fluttering threads of hair, and, she knew, staring eyes. The Snake of Ribs. Chal Managa in the Elan tongue.

She blew flies from her lips.
And voiced another poem.

*'On this morning*
*We saw a tree*
*With leaves of grey*
*And when we got closer*
*The leaves flew away*

*At noon the nameless boy*
*With the eaten nose*
*Fell and did not move*
*And down came the leaves*
*To feed*

*At dusk there was another tree*
*Grey fluttering leaves*
*Settling in for the night*

*Come the morning*
*They'll fly again'*

***Ampelas Rooted, the Wastelands***

The machinery was coated in oily dust that gleamed in the darkness as the faint glow of the lantern light slid across it, conveying motion where none existed, the illusion of silent slippage, as of reptilian scales that seemed, as ever, cruelly appropriate. She was breathing hard as she hurried down the narrow corridor, ducking every now and then to avoid the lumpy black cables slung down from the ceiling. Her nose and throat stung with the rank metal reek of the close, motionless air. Surrounded in the exposed guts of Root, she felt besieged by the unknowable, the illimitable mystery of dire arcana. Yet, she had made these unlit, abandoned passageways her favoured haunt, knowing full well the host of self-recriminating motivations that had guided her to such choices.

The Root invited the lost, and Kalyth was indeed lost. It was not that she could not find her way among the countless twisting corridors, or through the vast chambers of silent, frozen machines, evading the pits in the floors over which flagstones had never been installed, and staying clear of the chaos of metal and cables spilling out from un-paneled walls – no, she knew her way round, now, after months of wandering. This curse of helpless, hopeless bewilderment belonged to her spirit. She was not who they wanted her to be, and nothing she said could convince them of that.

She had been born into a tribe on the Elan Plain. She had grown into adulthood there, from child to girl, from girl to woman, and there had been nothing to set her apart, nothing to reveal her as unique, or gifted with unexpected talents. She had married a month after her first blooding. She had borne three children. She had almost loved her husband, and had learned to live with his faint disappointment in her, as her youthful beauty gave way to weary motherhood. She had, in truth, lived a life no different from that of her own mother, and so had seen clearly – without any special talent – the path of her life ahead, year after year, the slow decay of her body, the loss of suppleness, deepening lines upon her face, the sag of her breasts, the miserable weakening of her bladder. And one day, she would

find herself unable to walk, and the tribe would leave her where she was. To die in solitude, as dying was always a thing of solitude, as it must ever be. For the Elan knew better than the settled peoples of Kolanse, with their crypts and treasure troves for the dead, with the family servants and advisors, all throat-cut and packed in the corridor to the sepulcher, servants beyond life itself, servants forever.

Everyone died in solitude, after all. A simple enough truth. A truth no-one need fear. The spirits waited before they cast judgement upon a soul, waited for that soul – in its dying isolation – to set judgement upon itself, upon the life it had lived, and if peace came of that, then the spirits would show mercy. If torment rode the Wild Mare, why, then, the spirits knew to match it. When the soul faced itself, after all, it was impossible to lie. Deceiving arguments rang loud with falsehood, their facile weakness too obvious to ignore.

It had been a life. Far from perfect, but only vaguely unhappy. A life one could whittle down into something like contentment, even should the result prove shapeless, devoid of meaning.

She had been no witch. She had not possessed the breath of a shaman, and so would never be a Rider of the Spotted Horse. And when the end of that life had come for her and her people, on a morning of horror and violence, all that she had revealed then was a damning selfishness – in refusing to die, in fleeing all that she had known.

These were not virtues.

She possessed no virtues.

Reaching the central, spiral staircase – each step too shallow, too broad for human strides – she set off, her gasps becoming shallower and quicker with the exertion as she ascended level after level, up and out from Root, into the lower chambers of Feed, where she made use of the counterweighted ramp that lifted her by way of a vertical shaft past the seething vats of fungi, the stacked pens of orthen and grishol, drawing to a grating, shivering halt on the base level of Womb. Here, the cacophony of the young assailed her, the hissing shrieks of pain as the dread surgeries

were performed – as destinies were decreed in bitter flavours – and, having regained some measure of her wind, she hastened to ascend past the levels of terrible outrage, the stench of wastes and panic that shone like oil on soft hides among shapes writhing on all sides – shapes she was careful to avoid with her eyes, hurrying with her hands clapped over her ears.

From Womb to Heart, where she now passed among towering figures that paid her no heed, and from whose paths she had to duck and dodge lest they simply trample her underclaw. Ve'Gath Soldiers stood flanking the central ramp, twice her height and in their arcane armour resembling the vast machinery of Root far below. Ornate grilled visors hid their faces save their fanged snouts, and the line of their jaws gave them ghastly grins, as if the implicit purpose of their breed delighted them. More so than the J'an or the K'ell, the true soldiers of the K'Chain Che'Malle frightened Kalyth to the very core of her being. The Matron was producing them in vast numbers.

No further proof was needed – war was coming.

That the Ve'Gath gave the Matron terrible pain, each one thrust out from her in a welter of blood and pungent fluid, had become irrelevant. Necessity, Kalyth well knew, was the cruelest master of all.

Neither soldier guarding the ramp impeded her as she strode on to it, the flat stone underfoot pitted with holes designed to hold claws, and from which cold air flowed up around her – the plunge in ambient temperature on the ramp evidently served to somehow quell the instinctive fear the K'Chain experienced as the conveyance lifted with squeals and groans, up past the levels of Heart, ending at Eyes, the Inner Keep, Acyl Nest and home of the Matron herself. Riding the ramp alone, however, the strain of the mechanism was less pronounced, and she heard little more than the rush of air that ever disorientated her with a sense of falling, even as she raced upward, and the sweat on her limbs and upon her brow quickly cooled. She was shivering by the time the ramp slowed and then halted at the base level of Eyes.

J'an Sentinels observed her arrival from the foot of the half-spiral stairs that led to the Nest. As with the Ve'Gath, they were seemingly indifferent to her – no doubt aware that she had been summoned. Even were that not so,

they would see in her no threat to the Matron they had been bred to protect. Kalyth was not simply harmless; she was useless.

The hot, rank air engulfed her, cloying as a damp cloak, as she made her way to the stairs and began the awkward climb to the Matron's demesne.

At the landing one last sentinel stood guard. At least a thousand years old, Bre'nigan was gaunt and tall – taller even than a Ve'Gath – and his multilayered scales bore a silvered patina that made the creature seem ghostly, as if hewn from sun-bleached mica. Neither pupil nor iris was visible in his slitted eyes, simply a murky yellow, misshapen with cataracts. She suspected the bodyguard was blind, but in truth there was no way to tell, for when Bre'nigan moved, the J'an displayed perfect surety, indeed, grace and liquid elegance. The long, vaguely curved sword slung through a brass ring at his hip – a ring half-embedded in the creature's hide – was as tall as Kalyth, the blade a kind of ceramic, bearing a faint magenta hue, although the flawless edge gleamed silver.

She greeted Bre'nigan with a nod that elicited no reaction whatsoever, and then stepped past the Sentinel.

Kalyth had hoped – no, she had *prayed* – and when she set eyes upon the two K'Chain standing before the Matron, and saw that they were unaccompanied, her spirits plummeted. Despair welled up, threatened to consume her. She fought to draw breath into her tight chest.

Beyond the newcomers and huge on the raised dais, Gunth'an Acyl, the Matron, emanated agony in waves – and in this she was unchanged and unchanging, but now Kalyth felt from the enormous queen a bitter undercurrent of . . . something.

Unbalanced, distraught, Kalyth only then discerned the state of the two K'Chain Che'Malle, the grievous wounds half-healed, the chaotic skein of scars on their flanks, necks and hips. The two creatures looked starved, driven to appalling extremes of deprivation and violence, and she felt an answering pang in her heart.

But such empathy was shortlived. The truth remained: the K'ell Hunter Sag Churok and the One Daughter Gunth Mach had failed.

The Matron spoke in Kalyth's mind, although it was not speech of any sort, simply the irrevocable imposition of knowledge and meaning. *'Destriant Kalyth, an error in choice. We remain broken. I remain broken. You cannot mend, not alone, you cannot mend.'*

Neither knowledge nor meaning proved gifts to Kalyth. For she could sense Gunth'an Acyl's madness beneath the words. The Matron was undeniably insane. So too the course of action she had forced upon her children, and upon Kalyth herself. No persuasion was possible.

It was likely that Gunth'an Acyl comprehended Kalyth's convictions – her belief that the Matron was mad – but this too made no difference. Within the ancient queen, there was naught but pain and the torment of desperate need.

*'Destriant Kalyth, they shall try again. What is broken must be mended.'*

Kalyth did not believe Sag Churok and the One Daughter could survive another quest. And that was another truth that failed in swaying Acyl's imperative.

*'Destriant Kalyth, you shall accompany this Seeking. K'Chain Che'Malle are blind to recognition.'*

And so, at last, they had reached what she had known to be inevitable, despite her hopes, her prayers. 'I cannot,' she whispered.

*'You shall. Guardians are chosen. K'ell Sag Churok, Rythol, Kor Thuran. Shi'gal Gu'Rull. One Daughter Gunth Mach.'*

'I cannot,' Kalyth said again. 'I have no . . . talents. I am no Destriant – I am blind to whatever it is a Destriant needs. I cannot find a Mortal Sword, Matron. Nor a Shield Anvil. I am sorry.'

The enormous reptile shifted her massive weight, and the sound was as of boulders settling in gravel. Lambent eyes fixed upon Kalyth, radiating waves of stricture.

*'I have chosen you, Destriant Kalyth. It is my children who are blind. The failure is theirs, and mine. We have failed every war. I am the last Matron.*

*The enemy seeks me. The enemy will destroy me. Your kind thrives in this world – to that not even my children are blind. Among you, I shall find new champions. My Destriant must find them. My Destriant leaves with the dawn.'*

Kalyth said no more, knowing any response was useless. After a moment, she bowed and then walked, feebly, as if numb with drink, from the Nest.

A Shi'gal would accompany them. The significance of this was plain. There would be no failure this time. To fail was to receive the Matron's displeasure. Her judgement. Three K'ell Hunters and the One Daughter, and Kalyth herself. If they failed . . . against the deadly wrath of a Shi'gal Assassin, they would not survive long.

Come the dawn, she knew, she would begin her last journey.

Out into the wastelands, to find Champions that did not even exist.

And this, she now understood, was the penance set upon her soul. She must be made to suffer for her cowardice. *I should have died with the rest. With my husband. My children. I should not have run away. I now must pay for my selfishness.*

The one mercy was that, when the final judgement arrived, it would come quickly. She would not even feel, much less see, the killing blow from the Shi'gal.

A Matron never produced more than three assassins at any one time, and their flavours were anaethema, preventing any manner of alliance. And should one of them decide that the Matron must be expunged, the remaining two, by their very natures, would oppose it. Thus, each Shi'gal warded the Matron against the others. Sending one with the Seeking was a grave risk, for now there would be only two assassins defending her at any time.

Further proof of the Matron's madness. To so endanger herself, whilst at the same time sending away her One Daughter – her only child with the potential to breed – was beyond all common sense.

But then, Kalyth was about to march to her own death. What did she care of these terrifying creatures? Let the war come. Let the mysterious enemy

descend upon Ampelas Rooted and all the other Rooted, and cut down every last one of these K'Chain Che'Malle. The world would not miss them.

Besides, she knew all about extinction. *The only real curse is when you find yourself the last of your kind.* Yes, she well understood such a fate, and she knew the true depth of loneliness – no, not that paltry, shallow, self-pitying game played out by people everywhere – but the cruel comprehension of a solitude without cure, without hope of salvation.

Yes, everyone died alone. And there may be regrets. There may be sorrows. But these are as nothing to what comes to the last of a breed. For then there can be no evading the truth of failure. Absolute, crushing failure. The failure of one's own kind, sweeping in from all sides, finding this last set of shoulders to settle upon, with a weight no single soul can withstand.

There had been a residual gift of sorts to the language of the K'Chain Che'Malle, and it now tortured Kalyth. Her mind had awakened, far beyond what she had known in her life before now. Knowledge was no blessing; awareness was a disease that stained the entire spirit. She could gouge out her own eyes and still see too much.

Did the shamans of her tribe feel such crushing guilt, when recognition of the end finally arrived? She remembered anew the bleakness in their eyes, and understood it in ways she had not comprehended before, in the life she had once lived. No, she could do naught but curse the deadly blessings of these K'Chain Che'Malle. Curse them with all her heart, all her hate.

Kalyth began her descent. She needed the closeness of Root; she needed the decrepit machinery on all sides, the drip of viscid oils and the foul, close air. The world was broken. She was the last of the Elan, and now her sole remaining task on this earth was to oversee the annihilation of the last Matron of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Was there satisfaction in that? If so, it was an evil kind of satisfaction, making its taste all the more alluring.

Among her people, death arrived winging across the face of the setting sun, a black, tattered omen low in the sky. She would be that dread vision, that shred of the murdered moon. Driven to the earth as all things were, eventually.

*This is all true.*
*See the bleakness in my eyes.*

Shi'gal Gu'Rull stood upon the very edge of Brow, the night winds howling round his tall, lean form. Eldest among the Shi'gal, the assassin had fought and defeated seven other Shi'gal in his long service to Acyl. He had survived sixty-one centuries of life, of growth, and was twice the height of a full-grown K'ell Hunter, for unlike the Hunters – who were flavoured with mortality's sudden end at the close of ten centuries – the Shi'gal possessed no such flaw in their making. They could, potentially, outlive the Matron herself.

Bred for cunning, Gu'Rull held no illusions regarding the sanity of Mother Acyl. Her awkward assumption of godly structures of faith ill-fitted both her and all the K'Chain Che'Malle. The matron sought human worshippers, human servants, but humans were too frail, too weak to be of any real value. The woman Kalyth was proof enough of that, despite the flavour of percipience Acyl had given her – a percipience that should have delivered certitude and strength, yet had been twisted by a weak mind into new instruments of self-recrimination and self-pity.

That flavour would fade in the course of the Seeking, as Kalyth's swift blood ever thinned Acyl's gift, with no daily replenishment possible. The Destriant would revert to her innate intelligence, and that was a meagre one by any standard. She was already useless, as far as Gu'Rull was concerned. And upon this meaningless quest, she would become a burden, a liability.

Better to kill her as soon as possible, but alas, Mother Acyl's command permitted no such flexibility. The Destriant must choose a Mortal Sword and a Shield Anvil from among her own kind.

Sag Churok had recounted the failure of their first selection. The mass of flaws that had been their chosen one: Redmask of the Awl. Gu'Rull did not believe the Destriant would fare any better. Humans may well have thrived in the world beyond, but they did so as would feral orthen, simply by virtue of profligate breeding. They possessed no other talents.

The Shi'gal lifted his foreshortened snout and opened his nostril slits to scent the chill night air. The wind came from the east and, as usual, it stank of death.

Gu'Rull had plundered the pathetic memories of the Destriant, and therefore knew that no salvation would be found to the east, on the plains known as the Elan. Sag Churok and Gunth Mach had set out westward, into the Awl'dan, and there too they found only failure. The north was a forbidding, lifeless realm of ice, tortured seas and bitter cold.

Thus, they must journey south.

The Shi'gal had not ventured outside Ampelas Rooted in eight centuries. In that short span of time, it was likely that little had changed in the region known to humans as the Wastelands. Nonetheless, some advance scouting was tactically sound.

With this in mind, Gu'Rull unfolded his month-old wings, spreading the elongated feather-scales so that they could flatten and fill out under the pressure of the wind.

And then the assassin dropped over the sheer edge of Brow, wings snapping out to their fullest extent, and there arose the song of flight, a low, moaning whistle that was, for the Shi'gal, the music of freedom.

Leaving Ampelas Rooted . . . it had been too long since Gu'Rull felt this . . . this exhilaration.

The two new eyes beneath the lines of his jaw now opened for the first time, and the compounded vision – of the sky ahead and the ground below – momentarily confused the assassin, but after a time Gu'Rull was able to enforce the necessary separation, so that the vistas found their proper relationship to one another, creating a vast panorama of the world beyond.

Acyl's new flavours were ambitious, indeed, brilliant. Was such creativity implicit in madness? Perhaps.

Did that possibility engender hope in Gu'Rull? No. Hope was not possible.

The assassin soared through the night, high above a blasted, virtually lifeless landscape. Like a shred of the murdered moon.

***The Wastelands***

He was not alone. Indeed, he had no memory of ever having been alone. The notion was impossible, in fact, and that much he understood. As far as he could tell, he was incorporeal, and possessed of the quaint privilege of being able to move from one companion to another almost at will. If they were to die, or somehow find a means of rejecting him, why, he believed he would cease to exist. And he so wanted to stay alive, floating as he did in the euphoric wonder of his friends, his bizarre, disjointed family.

They traversed a wilderness ragged and forlorn, a place of broken rock, wind-rippled fans of grey sand, screes of volcanic glass that began and ended with random indifference. Hills and ridges clashed in wayward confusion, and not a single tree broke the undulating horizon. The sun overhead was a blurred eye that smeared a path through thin clouds. The air was hot, the wind constant.

The only nourishment the group had been able to find came from the strange swarms of scaled rodents – their stringy meat tasting of dust – and an oversized breed of rhizan that possessed pouches under their wings swollen with milky water. Day and night capemoths tracked them, ever patient should one fall and not rise, but this did not seem likely. Flitting from one person to the next, he could sense their innate resolve, their unfailing strength.

Such fortitude, alas, could not prevent the seemingly endless litany of misery that seemed to comprise the bulk of their conversation.

'What a waste,' Sheb was saying, clawing at his itching beard. 'Sink a few wells, pile these stones into houses and shops and whatnot. Then you'd have something worth something. Empty land is useless. I long for the day when it's all put to use, everything, right over the surface of the world. Cities merging into one –'

'There'd be no farms,' objected Last, but as always it was a mild, diffident objection. 'Without farms, nobody eats –'

'Don't be an idiot,' snapped Sheb. 'Of course there'd be farms. Just none of this kind of useless land, where nothing lives but damned rats. Rats in the ground, rats in the air, and bugs, and bones – can you believe all the bones?'

'But I –'

'Be quiet, Last,' said Sheb. 'You never got nothing useful to say, ever.'

Asane then spoke in her frail, quavering voice. 'No fighting, please. It's horrible enough without you picking fights, Sheb –'

'Careful, hag, or you're next.'

'Care to try *me*, Sheb?' Nappet asked. He spat. 'Didn't think so. You talk, Sheb, and that's all you do. One of these nights, when you're asleep, I'm gonna cut out your tongue and feed it to the fuckin' capemoths. Who'd complain? Asane? Breath? Last? Taxilian? Rautos? Nobody, Sheb, we'd all be dancing.'

'Leave me out of this,' said Rautos. 'I suffered enough for a lifetime when I was living with my wife and needless to say, I don't miss her.'

'Here goes Rautos again,' snarled Breath. 'My wife did this, my wife said that. I'm sick of hearing about your wife. She ain't here, is she? You probably drowned her, and that's why you're on the run. You drowned her in your fancy fountain, just held her down, watching as her eyes went wide, her mouth opened and she screamed through the water. You watched and smiled, that's what you did. I don't forget, I can't forget, it was awful. You're a murderer, Rautos.'

'There *she* goes,' said Sheb, 'talking about drowning again.'

'Might cut out *her* tongue, too,' said Nappet, grinning. 'Rautos, too. No more shit about drowning or wives or complainin' – the rest of you are fine. Last, you don't say nothing and when you do, it don't rile nobody. Asane, you mostly know when to keep your mouth shut. And Taxilian hardly ever says nothing anyway. Just us, and that'd be –'

'I see something,' said Rautos.

He felt their attentions shift, find focus, and he saw with their eyes a vague smudge on the horizon, something thrusting skyward, too narrow to be a mountain, too massive to be a tree. Still leagues away, rising like a tooth.

'I want to see that,' announced Taxilian.

'Shit,' said Nappet, 'ain't nowhere else to go.'

The others silently agreed. They had been walking for what seemed forever, and the arguments about where they should go had long since withered away. None of them had any answers, none of them even knew where they were.

And so they set out for that distant, mysterious edifice.

He was content with that, content to go with them, and he found himself sharing Taxilian's curiosity, which grew in strength and if challenged would easily overwhelm Asane's fears and the host of obsessions plaguing the others – Breath's drowning, Rauto's miserable marriage, Last's meaningless life of diffidence, Sheb's hatred and Nappet's delight in viciousness. And now the conversations fell away, leaving naught but the crunch and thud of bared feet on the rough ground, and the low moan of the ceaseless wind.

High above, a score of capemoths tracked the lone figure walking across the Wastelands. They had been drawn by the sound of voices, only to find this solitary, gaunt figure. Skin of dusty green, tusks framing its mouth. Carrying a sword but otherwise naked. A lone wanderer, who spoke in seven voices, who knew himself by seven names. He was many, but he was one. They were all lost, and so was he.

The capemoths hungered for his life to end. But it had been weeks. Months. In the meantime, they just hungered.

There were patterns and they demanded consideration. The elements remained disarticulated, however, in floating tendrils, in smears of loose black like stains swimming in his vision. But at least he could now see, and that was something. The rotted cloth had pulled away from his eyes, tugged by currents he could not feel.

The key to unlocking everything would be found in the patterns. He was certain of that. If only he could draw them together, he would understand; he would know all he needed to know. He would be able to make sense of the visions that tore through him.

The strange two-legged lizard, all clad in black gleaming armour, its tail nothing more than a stub, standing on a stone landing of some sort, whilst rivers of blood flowed down gutters to each side. Its unhuman eyes fixed unblinking on the source of all that blood – a dragon, nailed to a latticework of enormous wooden beams, the spikes rusthued and dripping with condensation. Suffering roiled down from this creature, a death denied, a life transformed into an eternity of pain. And from the standing lizard, cold satisfaction rose in a cruel penumbra.

In another, two wolves seemed to be watching him from a weathered ridge of grasses and bony outcrops. Guarded, uneasy, as if measuring a rival. Behind them, rain slanted down from heavy clouds. And he found himself turning away, as if indifferent to their regard, to walk across a denuded plain. In the distance, dolmens of some sort rose from the ground, scores of them, arranged without any discernable order, and yet all seemed identical – perhaps statues, then. He drew closer, frowning at the shapes, so oddly surmounted in jutting cowls, their hunched, narrow backs to him, tails curled round. The ground they crouched on glittered as if strewn with diamonds or crushed glass.

Even as he closed in on these silent, motionless sentinels, moments from reaching the nearest one, a heavy shadow slipped over him and the air was suddenly frigid. In wrought despair, he halted, looked up.

Nothing but stars, each one drifting as if snapped from its tether, like motes of dust on a slowly draining pool. Faint voices sinking down, touching his brow like flecks of snow, melting in the instant, all meaning lost. Arguments in the Abyss, but he understood none of them. To stare upward was to reel, unbalanced, and he felt his feet lift from the earth until he floated. Twisting round, he looked down.

More stars, but emerging from their midst, a dozen raging suns of green fire, slashing through the black fabric of space, fissures of light bleeding

through. The closer they came, the more massive they grew, blinding him to all else, and the maelstrom of voices rose to a clamour, and what had once felt like flakes of snow, quickly melting upon his heated brow, now burned like fire.

If he could but draw close the fragments, make the mosaic whole, and so comprehend the truth of the patterns. If he could –

*Swirls. Yes, they are that. The motion does not deceive, the motion reveals the shape beneath.*

*Swirls, in curls of fur.*

*Tattoos – see them now – see them!*

All at once, as the tattoos settled into place, he knew himself.

*I am Heboric Ghost Hands. Destriant to a cast down god. I see him –*

*I see you, Fener.*

The shape, so massive, so lost. Unable to move.

His god was trapped, and like Heboric, was mute witness to the blazing jade suns as they bore down. He and his god were in their path, and these were forces that could not be pushed aside. No shield existed solid enough to block what was coming.

*The Abyss cares nothing for us. The Abyss comes to deliver its own arguments, against which we cannot stand.*

*Fener, I have doomed you. And you, old god, you have doomed me.*

*Yet, I no longer regret. For this is as it should be. After all, war knows no other language. In war we invite our own destruction. In war we punish our children with a broken legacy of blood.*

He understood now. The gods of war and what they meant, what their very existence signified. And as he stared upon those jade suns searing ever closer, he was overwhelmed by the futility hiding behind all this arrogance, this mindless conceit.

*See us wave our banners of hate.*

*See where it gets us.*

A final war had begun. Facing an enemy against whom no defense was possible. Neither words nor deeds could fool this clear-eyed arbiter. Immune to lies, indifferent to excuses and vapid discourses on necessity, on the weighing of two evils and the facile righteousness of choosing the lesser one – and yes, these were the arguments he was hearing, empty as the ether they traveled.

*We stood tall in paradise. And then called forth the gods of war, to bring destruction down upon ourselves, our world, the very earth, its air, its water, its myriad life. No, show me no surprise, no innocent bewilderment. I see now with the eyes of the Abyss. I see now with my enemy's eyes, and so I shall speak with its voice.*

*Behold, my friends, I am justice.*

*And when at last we meet, you shall not like it.*

*And if irony awakens in you at the end, see me weep with these tears of jade, and answer with a smile.*

*If you've the courage.*

*Have you, my friends, the courage*?

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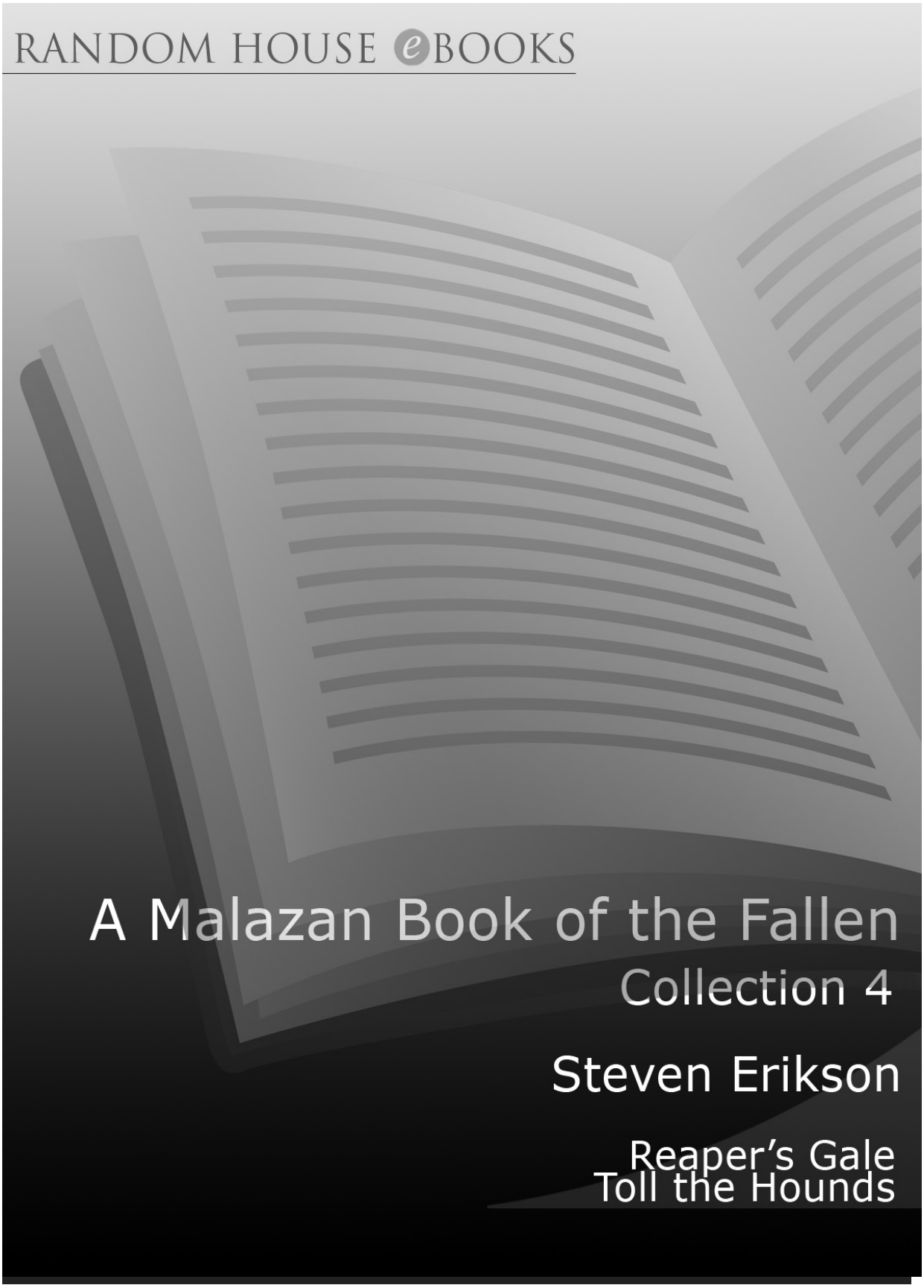

# A Malazan Book of the Fallen

## Collection 4

## Steven Erikson

Reaper's Gale
Toll the Hounds